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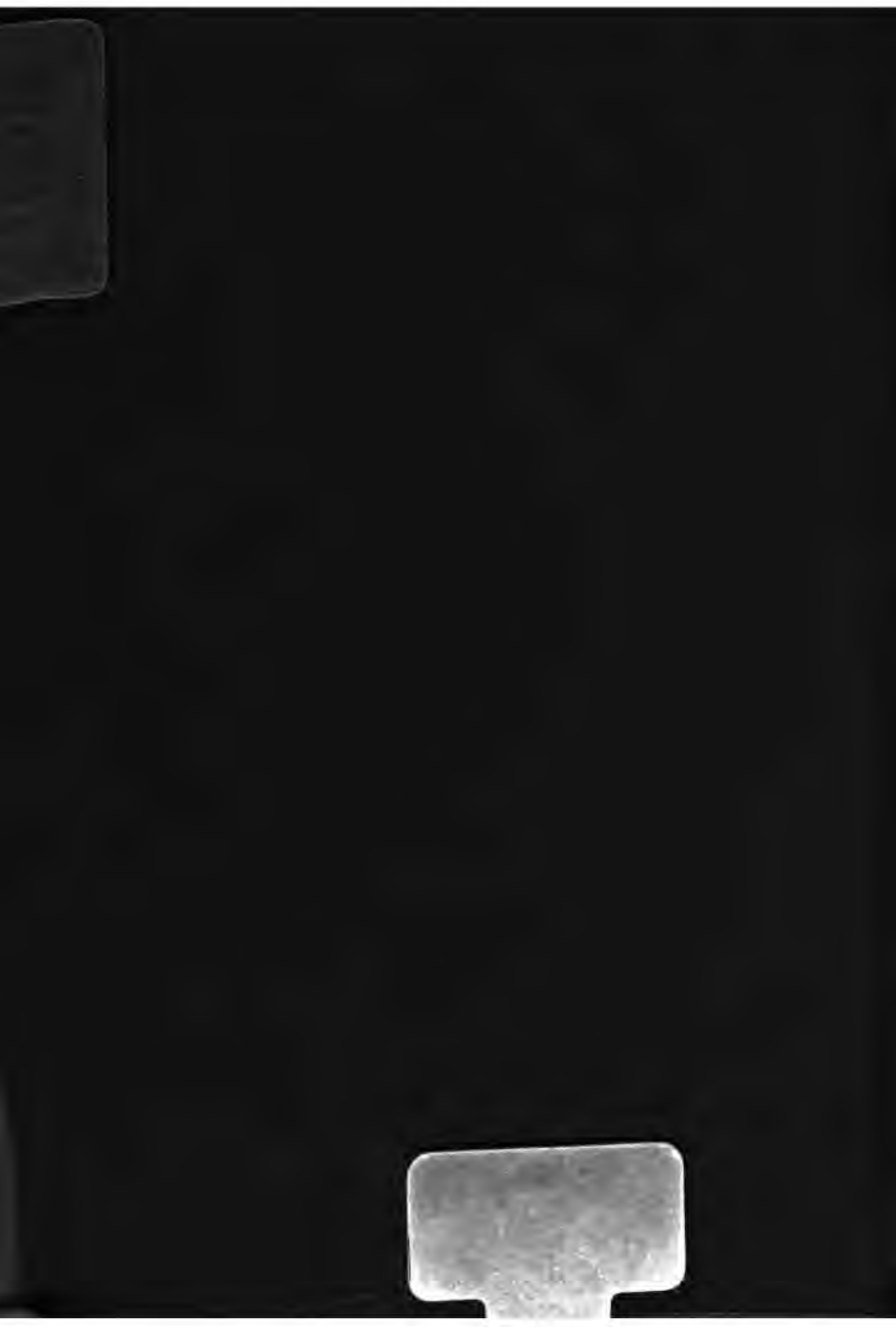
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the 1990s, the incidence of *S. flexneri* has increased in the United Kingdom [10]. In the United States, *S. flexneri* has been reported as the most common serotype in children with acute bacterial dysentery [11]. In the United Kingdom, *S. flexneri* has been reported as the most common serotype in children with acute bacterial dysentery [12].

There is a paucity of data on the epidemiology of *S. flexneri* in the United Kingdom. In the 1980s, *S. flexneri* was reported as the most common serotype in children with acute bacterial dysentery in the United Kingdom [12]. In the 1990s, *S. flexneri* was reported as the most common serotype in children with acute bacterial dysentery in the United Kingdom [13].

The purpose of this study was to determine the prevalence of *S. flexneri* in children with acute bacterial dysentery in the United Kingdom. The study was conducted in the United Kingdom, where *S. flexneri* is the most common serotype in children with acute bacterial dysentery [12].

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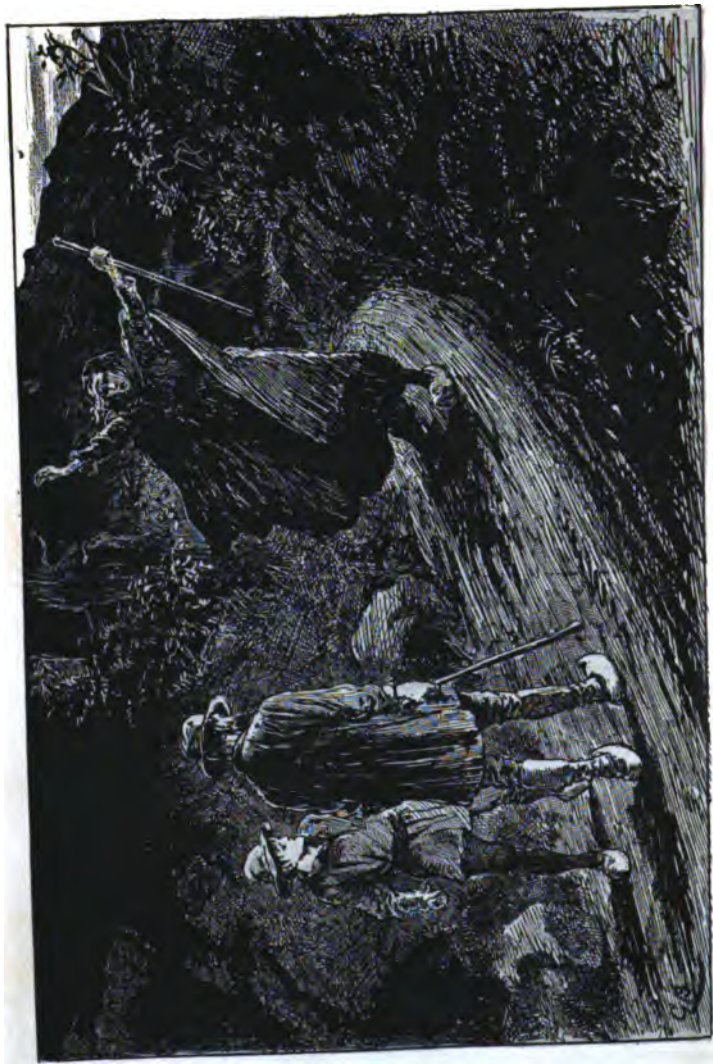
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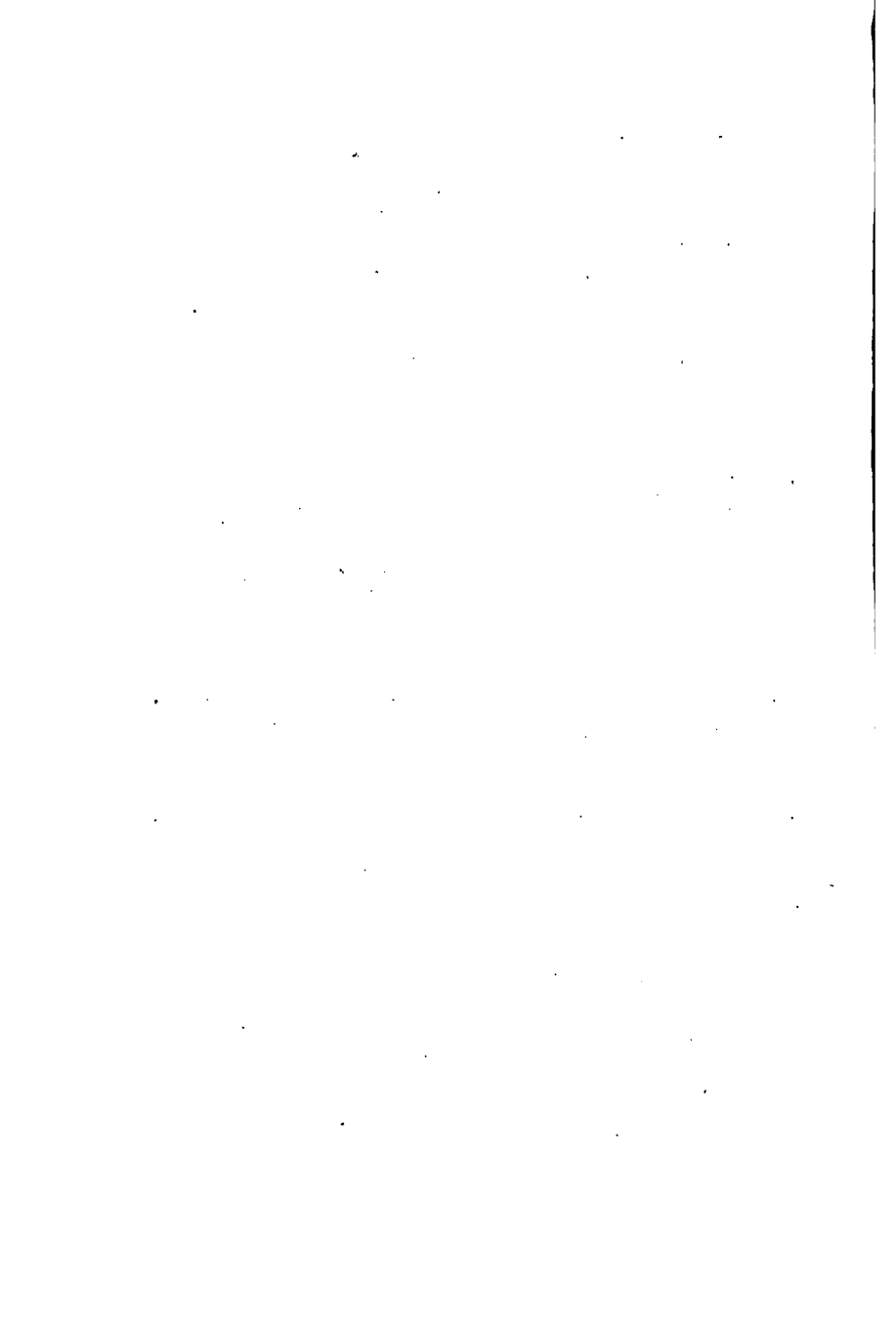
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"STRETCHING OUT HER ARMS, WITH WILD EYES AND EXCITED MANNER" (p. 33). (*Frontispiece.*)



BOUND BY A SPELL;

OR,

The Hunted Witch of the Forest.

"BLESSED ARE THE STORMS WHICH CAST THEIR WRECKS UPON THE
SHORES OF PARADISE."

BY

THE HON. MRS. GREENE,

*Author of "On Angels' Wings," "Gilbert's Shadow," "The Grey House
on the Hill," "The Star in the Dustheap," &c. &c.*

WITH EIGHT ORIGINAL ILLUSTRATIONS BY GORDON BROWNE.

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P R E F A C E .

THE subject of Witchcraft, and the persecutions which have resulted from the credulity of those who believed in its existence, has been little dwelt on by people writing for the young.

Yet in all the wide domain of history there is no more terrible record than that of the system by which men and women, chiefly women, were remorselessly put to death, or frightfully tortured, to induce them to confess that they were in league with the Evil One, and that they spent their existence in injuring their fellow-creatures by casting a blight upon them, their crops, and their cattle, and, indeed, upon all they possessed.


It has been computed* that as many as nine millions of persons have suffered the most cruel and agonising death from the suspicion that had fallen upon them that they were witches, and in league with evil spirits, and their master, the Devil.

Even little children and young girls were cruelly

* By Dr. Sprenger in his "Life of Mohammed."

put to death, and many boys in Germany were hanged or burned, for no other crime than reciting a few words which were used at the trial of one of these miserable wretches.

In the Canton Grisons, where the scene of the following story is laid, this horrible witch mania lingered to a late period, and the bitter and cruel persecution of the reputed witch Christine, will give some idea of how this merciless warfare was carried on.



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BOUND BY A SPELL;

OR,

THE HUNTED WITCH OF THE FOREST.



CHAPTER I.

IN HOT PURSUIT.

THE evening was sultry ; the sun, though already declining towards the west, shot long shafts of fiery heat athwart the maize fields and down the acacia walks ; the river flowed sulkily on, oppressed by the long heat of the day, and in the narrow streets of the little town of Protogno few passengers were stirring.

There was one inhabitant, however, of the town who seemed quite impervious to the sun's rays, or unconscious of the very existence of such a luminary. All day long he had lain on the parapet of the centre bridge of the town, lazily, and apparently uselessly, dangling a long line into the sulky river, which swirled and eddied round the arches beneath his feet, and which, so far, had only rewarded his labours by a solitary fish, of some nameless species, about five inches in length, whose appearance was certainly not inviting to the passers-by, but whose presence seemed to encourage his captor to continue his labours far into the afternoon.

Nor was this the only occasion on which Pietro Milano, or Pierre, as he was more commonly called, had tried his luck on the Ponte del Spirito. Day by day, week after week, his lithe form might be seen lying on the flat stones which coped the bridge, his sabot-clad feet hanging listlessly over the sides, and his whole appearance indicative of a lazy indifference to the world and all that passed around him. Only now and then, when some rare commotion, some drunken squabble, or dash of vehicles on the ascent or descent of the bridge caused him to look round, one saw, to their surprise, a pair of piercing eyes, full of a sombre fire which, once aroused to interest, flashed forth strange glances of defiance or contempt, and a pale face so full of subdued energy and strong resolve that those who did not know Pierre, and the strange unnatural life he had marked out for himself, could not resist a sudden interest in the lad, and a sympathetic desire to give him a helping hand towards an existence more noble and stirring than lolling hour by hour and day by day, lazily dreaming away the best portion of his life.

But those who did know Pietro well, and who cared for him, knew how vain it would be for them to try, by ever so covert or loving an effort, to move him from the purpose of his life, or to encourage him to turn the strength of his youth and the undoubted courage of his nature to pursuits more worthy and noble than those which he had selected for himself.

Indeed, not a few of the inhabitants of this wild semi-Italian village, which lay, as it were, on the confines of Italy and Switzerland, and which, hidden from the rest of the world by snow-covered hills and thick-growing pine-trees, seemed almost separated

from civilisation and progress, actually encouraged and strengthened the lad in his strange views of life, and foolishly fostered the natural bias of his untutored mind by their wild tales of superstitious folly.

For, although Switzerland was, at the time our story opens, struggling, in common with other countries, to rise up and shake itself free from the bonds of credulity and ignorance, and although science was lifting up its head from the mists in which it had so long slumbered, and was beginning, somewhat helplessly at first, to throw light on the dark and puzzling subjects of the age, yet this light, though it burned brightly in the capitals and chief towns of the surrounding countries, travelled but slowly through the land, and there were villages and even large towns on the confines of Piedmont, Italy, and Switzerland where superstition still held the people in thralldom, and where follies and cruelties, now almost too gross for belief, were perpetrated unrebuked, in the name of virtue and religion.

Perhaps in no part of the European continent was this mental lethargy more oppressive and tenacious than among the people who inhabited the valleys and mountainous regions which lay on the confines of the Canton Grisons and Italy; and where, owing to the difficulties of intercourse with their more enlightened countrymen, they still cherished the old feelings and customs of their mixed races, and viewed with a kind of rebellious fanaticism any attempt made by the more thoughtfully-inclined amongst them to pry into the secrets of Nature, and to clear away from the path of truth some of the many obstacles which encumbered it.

Nor was the small town or village of Protopgno in this respect a whit better than its neighbours. It held,

it is true, many humane and honest hearts, scattered here and there within the limits of the town and the outlying hamlets, who viewed with pain and horror the sufferings so often inflicted on their fellow-creatures for fancied injuries done by them without either their knowledge or complicity ; but such Christian charity was rare, and the exercise of it was sometimes dangerous in the extreme, for the ignorant rustics of the place were as quick to resent all interference with their preconceived ideas and hasty judgment as they were to take umbrage at a trifle, and imagine danger and death in the innocent glances or casual movements of some unsuspecting and harmless passer-by.

And yet, to look at Protogno, with its sunny pasture fields, its vine-clad slopes, its picturesque châteaux, and its church with its bright red roof crowning an adjacent height, one could never imagine that such superstitious heart-burnings had place amongst its inhabitants. In winter it seemed to nestle cosily against the pine-clad hills for warmth and shelter, wrapped in a mantle of snow, pure and white, and full of a calm and tranquil beauty ; while, in summer, one heard from afar on its grassy heights the musical tinkling of goat-bells, the lowing of soft russet-coated kine, and at morning and evening the rich sweet tones from the bell-tower on the hill, which seemed to swing forth over the pine-scented air a harmonious and consoling reply to each anxious heart, throbbing perhaps with care and sorrow in the valley beneath, reminding it that the flow of life is short, and that the rest which remaineth for it hereafter is not for a day but for ever and ever.

The town of Protogno lay south of the Canton Grisons, and at the head of a purple valley which led straight into the rich vine-lands and olive-fields of Italy.

It was within the actual border-land of Switzerland proper, and acknowledged its laws and honoured its institutions, but its châteaux and picturesque cattle-sheds stretched to the utmost limit of the Swiss line of demarcation, and no unfriendly feeling arising out of separate nationality existed between those who dwelt beyond the Swiss frontier and those who lived within it.

In this sequestered little town they spoke neither German nor Italian, nor yet even the soft Romansch language in its quaint purity. In the old days, when the French Protestants had been driven out of France and hunted hither and thither, across the valleys and over the mountains and rivers, this little semi-Swiss, semi-Italian town, inhabited chiefly by Protestants, had opened its arms to the unfortunate refugees and allowed them to take shelter in its midst.

Here, among the rough peasantry of Protogno, they found hospitality, generosity, and a safe resting-place, and were made much of in their trouble, and by-and-by they built themselves houses under the thick-growing chestnuts and up on the hill-sides. They planted vineyards and reared flocks, fell in love and married amongst the Swiss maidens and dark-eyed Italian youths, and prayed in their churches, and lay down to sleep in their churchyards, while the little town straggled higher and higher up the valley, and down closer to the torrent, a white and foaming stream which flowed from the glacier beyond, tearing over grey rocks and fallen crags in the narrow end of the gorge, and broadening as it neared the Italian end of the town into a quiet and somewhat sluggish stream, except indeed when bad weather visited the valley, which was subject to thunder-storms of no ordinary violence. Then the noise of the water as it

rushed onward through its narrow bed could be heard for a good mile off, and at night the howling of the wolves in the forest, or the roaring of the more distant bears in their mountain fastnesses, were for the time lost in the louder howl and roar of the waters.

But as a rule Protogno enjoyed fine and settled weather; its vineyard slopes produced exceptionally sweet wine, and the cattle were sleek and well-favoured. Few strangers passed through its quiet streets; the children screamed across from the windows unchecked, or sailed their boats in the quiet-flowing stream which rushed down the rough bed made for it among the cobble stones of the main street.

As one left the town, and wandered higher up towards the mountains, the châteaux became more picturesque, standing separately in gardens bright with flowers, rich with the scent of honey, and sheltered by sweet walnut-trees and chestnuts heavy with fruit. Over each châlet door was carved some text which had pleased the mind of the original builder, generally burnt in, in old Roman letters, in the Italian tongue, but occasionally also in German. The bears, too, had in almost every instance contributed their share to the beauty or ornamentation of the houses. For on almost every châlet or barn door was affixed a bear's head or paws, sometimes even three or four—trophies of the chase—which were regarded with awe and veneration by the superstitious inhabitants of the châlet itself; the fall of a bear's head or skeleton claw from its rusty nail above being considered as a matter of ill omen to those who dwelt within, and causing almost of necessity a fresh and dangerous expedition into the wilds of the mountain forests, where, up among the thick pine-woods, and often in the clefts of

almost inaccessible crags, the bears kept watch over their young, and fought a desperate battle with those who sought to interfere with the savage freedom of their lives.

On the afternoon, or rather evening, now more than a hundred years ago, when our story begins, the town was unusually still ; the sun had hung all day long suspended in a cloudless sky, filling the valley with a fiery glare, and driving within-doors those whose occupations did not absolutely require them to remain in the open air. Even these, as a rule, sought the shelter of adjacent trees and outhouses, or lay prone on their faces by the river's side, to enjoy the slight impulse given to the air by the onward movement of the water. The flies swarmed round the heads of the patient cattle browsing carefully between the vine-rows, while the children, who, unlike their more sober elders, could not brook the confinement of the house, played happily in the long sycamore and acacia alleys which led to the outlying farms and villages. It was an afternoon when even the darting of the green-bodied dragon-flies seemed too restless for the hour and place, and Nature lay steeped in a still and drowsy lethargy.

But this sultry silence was not destined to be of long continuance: the sun's disc had barely touched the highest peak of the hills behind which it had still to sink before shade and cool air might be looked for, when, rising with an ever-increasing wail of terror and despair, a child's cry broke the stillness of the valley ; a cry piercing, wild, and full of an intense melancholy and pathos, and which, coming like a throb of pain across the sleeping fields, formed itself thrice into the words : "*À Dieu, à Dieu, à Dieu !*"

Pietro Milano, still hanging lazily over the bridge, was the first whose startled ear took in these sounds of anguish. For a moment he seemed to doubt the evidence of his senses, and then, raising himself from his recumbent position on the bridge, he paused, and while the rod which he had so assiduously clasped through all these tedious scorching hours slid unnoticed over the stone parapet and fell into the river beneath, he passed his hand eagerly beneath his jerkin, and the dull sloth of the moment before seemed to fall from his face like a mask, giving place to an excitement and passion which augured ill for those on whom they might hereafter be expended.

"Heavens!" he muttered, as he shaded his eyes with his hand, and gazed a moment keenly towards the narrow quay which bordered the right bank of the river; "I have not waited in vain; if I am not mistaken this time, I actually see the little wretch. Ah, they are growing bold, these Delemonts, thus to venture at midday into the town; but, by all I love, they shall not escape me to-day!" And as again the distant wail of fear and sorrow rose upon the air, Pietro answered it with a responsive yell of defiance, and rushing down the steep incline of the bridge, his blouse blown out behind him by the air and his sabots clattering noisily over the rounded cobbles of the street, he made with giant strides for the quay.

And now a chase began which seemed to stir the sleepy pulses of all who witnessed it. Many windows overlooking the quay were thrown open, whilst heads peered forth and voices vociferated loudly.

Some few kind hearts, it is true, cried, "Shame! shame! Pietro, leave the poor child alone," but the greater number appeared to find a cruel pleasure in

urging on a pursuit which, to the hunted one at least, seemed a race for life or death.

Nor was the chase now confined to one. Pietro, as he dashed down the long acacia walk which bordered the river, gathered many a willing follower in his train, and who, though unbidden, shared in the excitement, and followed blindly at their leader's heels.

"Paul the fool!" they cried in hoarse contemptuous chorus; "have a care, Paul; the wolf, the wolf is at thy heels; the wolf will catch thee, little Paul; ha! the wolf, the wolf!" and still, many yards ahead, but panting, breathless, and white as death, ran the child whose sudden appearance in the town had caused this extraordinary sensation.

Every now and then he turned and cast an agonised glance at his pursuers, not as if he feared them or dreaded that they should overtake him, but their words seemed to inspire him with some uncontrollable terror. His straining eyes searched the space which intervened between him and the noisy rabble, while through his dry lips still came the plaintive cry of anguish, "*À Dieu, à Dieu!*" though now sunk to an almost inaudible whisper and swallowed up as it were in the despair which had suddenly overpowered him.

"Ha! now we must soon catch him; the road a little farther on is blocked up; have a care though, lads, that he does not double on you by the fountain and thus escape," cried Pietro, crimson, breathless, but triumphant, as he still pressed forward with loud clattering steps.

The boys thus addressed spread themselves out right and left across the road.

"Now," cried Pietro, as he stooped under the low-growing branches of the trees which grew around the fountain, and momentarily impeded his way, "now we must pin him, and we shall make the little fool speak; surround him, lads, and do not let him escape;" and Pietro sprang forward into the open space where the cool waters of the fountain were falling with a refreshing tranquil sound into the basin beneath.

But here he halted suddenly, while his face crimsoned to an angry purple, and the cry of hoarse triumph already on his lips gave place to a howl of defeated vengeance and dismay. The child had disappeared. Little Paul had once again escaped the snare of the fowler. It seemed to all as if the earth had opened at his pleading cry and swallowed him up, for no vestige was there to be seen of the slight flying figure, the pale scared face, the long floating hair; and Pietro stood open-mouthed and aghast, while his followers crowded around him, looking with a vacant surprise from him to the scene before them.

"Ha!" cried one of the elder boys as he shook his head ominously, "now we know for certain what he is, and where he comes from. This is not the first time that he has vanished under our very eyes just when we thought we had secured him. My mother has often told me to beware how I meddled with him, but now I have seen it for myself, and I, for one, shall not interfere with him again."

At these words, spoken in the most sober good faith, Pietro uttered a kind of snort of contempt, and stamped on the dusty pathway with his wooden shoe, while his handsome face assumed a sinister expression most unpleasant to look at.

"I, at least, am not afraid of him," he said, defiantly, and once more feeling surreptitiously beneath the breast of his jerkin, his eyes travelled searchingly over every object and every foot of the ground that lay between him and the mound of stone and brickwork which temporarily blocked up the way at the further end.

But what was there for him to see? A stretch of soft velvet-green grass, a few trees whose slight stems could not conceal the birds which pecked at the flies at their mossy roots, some children toddling about or lolling in the shade, and whose nurses had probably gone boating with their lovers down the stream, and a woman in a snowy-white cap and fresh print dress, sitting beside a wicker cradle, with her head leaning against the trunk of a tree behind her, and her eyes closed in an apparently peaceful slumber; these, with the fountain tossing up its bright waters in the evening sunshine, were the sole objects to be seen.

For one moment Pietro advanced to the side of the quay and looked over it into the slow-gliding river, but there was nothing to be seen there either; no struggling form doing battle with the swift current for its life, no cries, no boat near enough at hand to have carried off the panting, terror-stricken child. Then without deigning a reply to the many suggestions of his youthful followers Pietro walked down the wide, flat stones which bordered the quay, and still turning his piercing gaze on every object large enough to conceal a sparrow, and pouring out a string of muttered imprecations between his clenched teeth, strode straight across the grass to the sweet-scented walnut-tree beneath which sat Marie Fedeles, who had now awakened from her slumbers and with swift white fingers was

knitting a child's worsted sock, and at the same time rocking to and fro the ungainly wicker cradle which, for convenience sake, she had drawn close up under the shade of the tree.

"Marie," cried Pietro, suddenly stopping opposite the fairest and kindest mother in the whole town—"Marie, what has become of the child?"

"Of whom, Pierre?" and Marie lifted up her serene face from her knitting and looked at the angry boy before her with eyes which gave no response to his eager questioning.

"Of whom?" repeated Pierre, markedly; "thou knowest well enough who I mean; what has become of Paul Delemont? Answer me at once. He was here a moment ago;" and Pietro once more struck his foot impatiently on the ground.

"There is no need to stamp and roar at me in such a fashion," replied Marie, quietly; "thy bad words and thy bad temper will never draw forth an answer from me. Oh! but the day is hot, and my eyes are blinded with the sun;" and Marie, yawning indifferently, rubbed her eyelids with her fingers, and then resumed her knitting without any further attempt at a reply.

"Answer me, Marie, at once, 'Yes' or 'No.' Thou needst not assume such innocence; didst thou see him? I am certain that little wretch is hidden somewhere beside you."

"So!" said Marie, smiling, "is that it? Thou thinkest I am sitting on the child, or hiding him perhaps under my dress. If thou wert a degree less rough and abominable I might stand up, Pierre, and convince thee of the contrary, but as it is, thou mayst go home;" and Marie assiduously rocked the cradle and turned

away her head from the burning eyes of the boy, who sought to read her very thoughts.

But as she rocked she tucked up her print dress sufficiently high to show the rungs of the wooden chair, under which the green grass was growing, and upon which rested two of the smallest and neatest feet imaginable, clad in leather slippers, with embroidered toes.

Pietro pretended not to see this action, though it convinced him that his prey was not secreted beneath the starched folds of Marie's dress, and he moved impatiently away to continue his search in some other quarter ; but before he turned his back on Marie, he exclaimed angrily—

"You know well enough where he is, if you chose to tell me ; I am not such a chicken as you take me for."

"I know well where he ought to be," she replied, somewhat quickly and bitterly.

"Where ?"

"Why, in heaven, with the good God, to whom he as surely belongs as others belong elsewhere. Ah ! I think shame on thee, Pietro, that thou shouldst persecute that poor child as thou dost ! But thou wilt reap trouble for it yet, for God keeps a special watch over those poor lambs who cannot take care of themselves, and those who wrong and hunt them to their graves will not go unpunished."

"Ah, Marie ! thou art really too good for this world ; thou hadst better turn priest and mount the pulpit," cried Pietro, with a contemptuous shrug of his high shoulders, as he plunged his hands into the deep pockets beneath his blouse, and walked with swinging steps across the grass ; but ere he passed out

of sight beneath the thick trees which bordered the fountain, he turned his face once more in Marie's direction, and asked, in a loud voice—

“Where is Antonio?”

“So you would like to know, would not you, Pierre? Then I, for one, will not tell you. You would make that poor lad of mine as wicked as yourself, great poltroon that thou art.”

These last words Marie murmured to herself, fearing, perhaps, to trespass too far on the border-land of such a tyrant spirit; but when Pietro was once completely out of sight, the frown relaxed, her fingers ceased their rapid movements, her knitting was once more laid aside, only this time on the grass at her feet, while a smile, half sad, half pitiful, lit up her face, making it a hundred times more beautiful than before.

She gave one cautious glance around, to see that Pietro had not returned on his steps, and then, satisfied of her own security, she drew near the cradle, which up to this moment she had been so assiduously rocking, and, kneeling down, she withdrew with cautious fingers the curtains.

“Oh, is it possible? the poor lamb has fallen asleep. I feared every moment he would cry out,” she softly murmured; “but how pale he is, and how quiet!” Marie gazed with astonishment within the shaded precincts of the cradle. “I will not rouse him; he is weary and needs rest; it will be safer in any case not to waken him yet.” Then, bending over him lightly, she touched with her own lips the white face which lay on the pillow.

“Ah, pitiful heavens! what ails him? his cheek is like ice,” she cried, starting back, and she hastily drew aside the curtains to their farthest stretch;

"is he asleep, or what? His hand, too, is as cold as death. Oh!" she uttered wildly, "either he has fainted, or they have hunted this poor child to his grave. I must seek help somewhere!" and, snatching up her own pretty little infant of a year old, which had all this time been unconsciously picking the heads off some daisies, not a dozen paces off, beneath the trees, she started off at full pace down the quay to find some friend whom she could trust, and who would return with her to decide the momentous question which she feared to face alone, the question whether for little Paul the issue of the moment was to be life or death.

With flushed face, and straining, tearful eyes, Marie Fedele ran hither and thither, mutely searching for a neighbour on whose secrecy she could rely. Recognising a friend seated by a flower-stall close at hand, whose kindness of heart she had proved before, she turned aside and earnestly prayed her to return with her to the fountain.

Her friend, not knowing for what her services were required, hastily snatched up her red umbrella, and leaving a little ragged urchin to protect her goods, hurried after, questioning volubly as she went, but Marie had neither breath nor time to waste her words; she caught her neighbour by the arm and dragged her forward into the open space in front of the quay, and then along its shaded walk to the fountain. When she reached it she gave her infant into the woman's arms, and throwing herself once more on her knees beneath the walnut-trees, where stood the cradle, she drew down her companion beside her.

Then a strange cry broke from her lips; her face

suddenly blanched to a death-like pallor, and her words fell in awed syllables from her mouth—

“The cradle is empty ; Pietro has been watching all the time ; he has taken him away. Would that he had died in his sleep, that he had returned to the good God who gave him life !”

Marie Fedele, overwrought and exhausted, burst into a flood of tears, and buried her face in the now empty cradle, while far off, somewhere within the air above, on the distant wind, or away out on the water, none could tell whence, there came the refrain of his last words in the low plaintive cry of the hunted child, “À Dieu, à Dieu, à Dieu !”

CHAPTER II.

MUTTERINGS OF THE STORM.

PAUL the fool, whose appearance in the town or village of Protogno had been the cause of such excitement and heart-burning amongst its inhabitants, was a little orphan of undoubted French extraction.

The Delemonts had originally been a wealthy family residing in the South of France, but, like so many others of their race, they had been forced by persecution and cruelty to take refuge in a foreign land, and had found in Protogno a quiet resting-place where they were not only unmolested, but received with friendly hospitality.

Nicolas Delemont, the grandfather of little Paul, had been one of the finest men ever seen in their town, and the inhabitants of Protogno were as proud of him as if he had been a true-born Swiss peasant. As a boy he had won all their hearts with his honest handsome face, and as a man he had not declined in favour.

He was adored by the village children. He was the companion of the best and bravest men in the town, and, all unconscious to himself, he was the apple of discord amongst not a few of the maidens of Protogno.

Many a village beauty as well as others more ordinary in their appearance gave him their hearts unasked, and many a jealous eye watched him as he went hither and thither through the town, but Nicolas was all unconscious of their espionage.

At last the news quite unexpectedly burst upon the town that Nicolas was going to be married, and that in making his choice he had selected none of the rural beauties who had secretly been fighting for his heart. He had fallen in love with little Christine Costanza, the motherless, fatherless, penniless girl, towards whose support the villagers weekly contributed a certain sum, and whose whole life had been hitherto passed nursing and watching the little cr  tin girl of Simon Chaudron, the shoemaker, whose other daughter, Janette, was too vain and too busy and too self-seeking to consider any time well spent which was not devoted to herself.

Many a day when Christine was seated on the grassy slope by the roadside, threading daisies for the little girl under her charge or making buttercup crowns to place on her head, Nicolas had climbed the hill-side and seated himself beside the sick child, chatting to her in a strange undertone about fairies in the flower-bells, and the gold in the puff-balls, and the spider's store of silver thread, till the poor withered face would look up and smile, and a wizened hand would lie in his confidingly ; and Christine would listen all the time with wide-opened eyes and never know how the deep sigh from her lonely heart, breathed all unconsciously as she sat and watched her charge, found an echo in a warm and loving breast. Now, however, the daisies were growing on little Marguerite's grave, and she had a crown on her head brighter than the golden buttercups, and there was no more work to be found for Christine in Simon's house, and at the end of her term of service it was arranged that she must go forth and seek her living elsewhere.

But while her heart still ached for her dear charge,

and her body suffered from the blows dealt out to her unsparingly by Janette Chaudron's hands, who had the sharpest features and the most envious heart and the worst figure in all the town, a great and overpowering joy came to her unsought, but infinitely precious, the love of the good and handsome Nicolas ; and before the mad jealousy of Janette could find place and time to expend its bitterness on her head, she was taken from their house and placed at the pretty village inn belonging to Marco Biondino, under the charge of his wife, where she remained until the day Nicolas made her his and carried her away with him to France, where, in the strong courage and faith of a brave but ignorant heart, he hoped to plead his cause with the higher powers, and recover at least a portion of the property which undoubtedly belonged of right to the Delemont family.

Nicolas was never seen again in Protogno. He and his wife settled down in a small French village, where, as a watchmaker, he earned a considerable sum, and kept his wife for some years in comfort and content. But the lawyers' expenses, connected with his own absorbing desire to recover the family estates for his parents and his wife, grew each year heavier and heavier, and meantime the family of Nicolas was increasing, and soon there was hardly money enough to buy bread sufficient to fill the mouths of the little ones.

This was grief to the heart of Nicolas, and morning, noon, and night he stood at his trade, working long after his family were in bed, until a haze grew over his eyes, and his once keen sight could no longer detect accurately the fine threads of the springs, or the close mechanism of the various wheels. When, at

last, the truth forced itself on his mind that his sight was failing, and he cried to Heaven for help, God answered him, and took to Himself three out of the four little ones, whose future was the burning anxiety of his life. One after another the malaria fever seized them. Nicolas rocked them in his arms and soothed them into fitful slumbers, and laid them finally at rest for ever in their narrow beds ; and thus the family possessions were as naught to him, and the one precious spot of land was that which held in its bosom his three flaxen-haired boys.

Only one son remained to them now, and this was the handsome son, Alexandre Delemont, who, years afterwards, appeared amongst the astonished folk of Protogno, a very counterpart of his father, and who, intending to spend the rest of his life amongst them, brought with him a wife, almost a child, a little maiden with a white cap, a soft and blushing face, and her eyes full of but one story, her love for her brave Alexandre, and her desire to fulfil to the uttermost the wishes of his heart. This was the mother of little Paul.

The cottage where they shortly afterwards settled down, and where their son Paul was born, was remote from the actual town of Protogno. It was unlike the other houses of the canton, being built of rough stone and roofed with slate, and had at one time been the hunting-lodge of a young Italian nobleman, to whom the woods belonged by purchase, not by inheritance, for this dark and gloomy forest was one looked upon by the inhabitants of the whole canton with unconcealed abhorrence and superstitious dread ; and the young and fiery nobleman, who was hot for the pleasures of the chase, and free from the fear of

evil eyes, were-wolves, and witches, purchased for a mere trifle the right for ever to hunt the wild beasts of the surrounding woods. Here he glutted himself for a time with the slaughter of bears and wolves, until, called to service in the war, he had to quit his hunting-grounds for still more bloody fields ; and Alexandre Delemont, only lately arrived in Protogno, accepted the post of forester to the Count, and settled down with his young wife in the now empty hunting-lodge, glad of an occupation which so entirely suited his own tastes, and proud of the home which he was able to give to Marie in the pretty and comfortably furnished cottage, with its picturesque flower-garden and tastefully-arranged pleasure grounds.

Yet not one inhabitant of Protogno envied Alexandre this apparently sudden stroke of luck. They were glad to see a son of Nicolas back amongst them, and they received him with a welcome worthy of their hospitable town ; but when it became known that he had been offered, and had accepted, the post of forester in the dark woods of the Italian nobleman, a gloom fell upon most faces, and a few kindly hearts warned him of his danger, and advised him, while there was yet time, to withdraw from his contract and be satisfied with some humbler post.

Alexandre listened to them with grateful attention, but he, like his master the Count, had a mind totally free from superstitious dread. He confessed it openly to them. The stories they told him of the forest and its many terrors, of the were-wolves and witches who infested its unhallowed depths, made no impression on him ; nor even the more horrible tales of the hill beyond the wood, untrodden for a century by the foot of man since a well-known and terrible woman had

been hanged from the arm of the mill which crowned its summit: a wretch of blackest dye; and as this unhallowed spot lay also within the young Count's property, it would of necessity be under his charge.

Alexandre shuddered, it is true, as they recounted to him this hideous story. "I have heard it before," he said; "my father has told me of it; unfortunate Madeline l'Estrange!"

He said nothing more, but the people looked at him in wonder. Their history had brought no fear, only troubled pain to his face; he added, however, presently, "Do not vex my little wife with these stories; it is unnecessary," then turned away as if he wished to hear no further discussion on the matter.

It was in this cottage, on the borders of this dark ill-omened forest, that Paul Delemont, later known in the town as the "little fool," saw the light, but neither Alexandre nor Marie ever found in his sweet and beautifully-chiselled face any trace or gloomy foreshadowing of the cloud which was to darken the bright heyday of his boyish life.

The road tending to the Count's cottage led only to the forest, so those who visited at the Delemonts' house had nothing but business or pleasure to take them there, and the walk from Protogno to the house of the forester was a long and tedious one. But Alexandre and Marie were in nowise lonely or discontented with their lives. They had married each other for love; they were healthy, contented, and prudent, and they never wearied of the daily duties which fell to their lot. The forester, brave and fearless, ranged his woods and looked after the interests of those who paid him, while Marie kept his house in order and superintended his farm.

Marie was *petite* and tidy. She kept her little garden trim with her own hands, and no one had ever surprised her in an untidy dress or ill-starched cap. The world always seemed rose-coloured for her and for all that belonged to her. Her husband, no one could deny, was as handsome a young fellow as France, Italy, or Switzerland could boast, and her child was perfect. The neighbours who visited at her house said so, and said with truth that there was not such a child to be seen in the town or villages from which they came. Paul was indeed a boy of wonderful beauty and grace. He had a delicately-shaped head, which sat upon his shoulders with such dignity and ease that he might have been the child of a prince and not of a peasant. His eyes were of that rare shade which more resembles the bloom on a purple plum than any other colour. The pupils, which from his birth were almost unnaturally large, gave perhaps this peculiar depth of colouring, which was also enhanced by his flaxen hair and the delicate tinting of his skin.

It was a strange fact, but none the less true, that from its very birth, those who saw the child, as the neighbours did, at rare intervals, predicted that some wonderful or sad fate would overtake it. Scarcely any mother could look into the little fellow's face without her eyes filling with sympathetic tears. There was such an indescribable air of melancholy in the expression, mixed with a confiding sweetness; and often when it turned from the searching or admiring glance of a friend or visitor at the house and laid its cheek against its mother's bosom, stretching at the same time its little arms around her neck, women would turn aside and smooth out the crumpled folds of their dress, or perhaps, undisguisedly, wipe away the tears

which some painful and sudden emotion had unexpectedly called up.

But Marie saw no fatal beauty in the sweet eyes which looked into hers with such love and confidence. It was only when they gazed at her through tears that sometimes she felt a pang of misgiving or sudden quick pain at her heart ; but this was indeed of rare occurrence. The child seldom cried, and Marie rested happy and satisfied, not only with it, but with all else that concerned the daily tenor of her life.

But the dark days of Marie's life were soon to close in around her ; and the cottage on the borders of the thick wood, which, despite its evil surroundings, had become of late noticeable for the life of purity and peace carried on within its walls, was destined again to resume its character and to appear a blot on the landscape from which people turned their heads with a shuddering fear, dreading that some ill fate might overtake them also should they wander under the shadow of its ill-omened roof.

It was in the early spring of one of the fairest summers that ever came to Switzerland that Marie Delemont prepared, at her husband's request, a comfortable and pretty chamber looking out over her own lovely flower-garden as a residence for Christina, better known as Christine Delemont, Alexandre's mother, who, having lately become a widow, and being homeless, without means, and broken-hearted at the loss of her faithful Nicolas, was considered by them to be in sore need of comfort and consolation, and whom they had invited to come and take up her abode with them in their cottage home, until time had softened her grief and given her the leisure necessary for making further plans for her future.

Christine's return to Protogno was quite looked forward to by many of the inhabitants of the town. They had a curiosity to see again the girl who had lived all her childhood among them, and who had been, almost as if in a fairy tale, snatched out of poverty and hardships and transported into a paradise of happiness and comfort by the handsome Nicolas, the prince of their village ; and much sympathy was both felt and expressed for her by the inhabitants of the town at the loss of her brave and loving husband. But these kindly feelings were not shared by all. There were some in Protogno to whom the very name of Christine Delemont was as gall and wormwood, and who spoke of her return to Protogno with no pleasure, or even with the indifference of those who took no interest in her welfare. The very thought that they must even look upon her face again became, as the time for her arrival approached, not only a source of bitterness, but gave rise to, at least in one heart, a burning sense of actual pain, a smarting and gnawing which could not be appeased, an anguish which, having slumbered for years, now leaped again into life and cried aloud for vengeance ; nor did it cry long without some effort being made to appease and solace it.

Many days before Christine appeared at the cottage, rumours, at first vague and almost intangible, began to be whispered and circulated about the town, rumours about the past life of the unhappy Christine at which honest people stood aghast, and suggestions which made the more superstitious folk of the place thrill with a nervous horror and dread at the thought of her coming amongst them.

Some few denied with indignation the truth of

these reports, and tried vainly to trace these most cruel insinuations to their original source ; but, as is always the case, ill-natured whispers grow fast and expand, and take such venomous root in credulous hearts that the most innocent life must eventually succumb before their encroachments ; and had Christine, on her arrival in Protogno, been in the mood to visit her former acquaintances and friends in the town, she would have gazed in wonder at their averted faces and cold and distant glances, and her reception would perhaps have given rise in her mind to the thought that, without her Nicolas to support and protect her, she was once again in their eyes but the poor charity outcast who had been thankful for the crumbs that fell under their tables.

But, as it was, the poor broken-hearted widow had no heart to go forth from the shadow of her son's house. In him and in his wife Marie, with her gentle voice and loving ways, she had all the sympathy she desired. Her arrival was not even known in the town. Alexandre rose early one morning and went out to meet her. He was absent two days, leaving Marie and Paul alone in the cottage, and he returned late one night when darkness and sleep had possession of the little town, so that Christine had been installed for nearly a week in the forester's cottage before any one outside knew of her arrival.

Even then, Alexandre, when he visited the town and was congratulated by some on his mother's return, was reticent. She was oppressed, he said, with sorrow, and scarcely able to bear the smallest allusion to her recent loss. He would ask them not to call and see her just yet, but by-and-by, in a few weeks, when she was somewhat recovered, he and

Marie would be glad to see them, and he was sure his mother would make an effort to meet them. As he said this, Alexandre, with his handsome eyes clouded with tears, did not notice the covert glances passing between those whom he addressed. "So," whispered one, more unkind than the rest of the neighbours who had gathered at the village forge to hear Alexandre's news, "so it is all true ; see how he turns his head away, he cannot look us in the face ; he knows well why Christine will not come to see us, and puts us off with his ridiculous story of her grief and trouble for the loss of her old husband."

Alexandre must have caught at least a portion of this malevolent speech, for he turned suddenly and looked the speaker full in the face with a glance of amazement, horror, grief, and speechless disgust. The tears which stood in his eyes a few minutes before were now dashed passionately aside, as he stood and confronted the woman who could speak thus of his honoured and broken-hearted mother.

Janette Chaudron, for it was she who had spoken, quailed before the honest indignation flaming in Alexandre's eyes, and when at last the question burst from his lips—"Wicked woman ! what hast thou to say against my mother, or how canst thou dare to mock at her sorrow ?"—Janette shuffled uneasily about in her loose carpet slippers, and muttering a reply which no one heard, moved with her crooked, ungainly gait out of the forge.

Alexandre looked around at his neighbours as she passed out, expecting, with those still burning eyes of his, to read sympathy, and a glowing appreciation of the wrong inflicted on his heart, written visibly on their faces. What he found there can now never be

known, for when all had remained silent, and no murmur of disapproval or disgust had run through the little crowd gathered round him, Alexandre, with uplifted head, and eyes dangerously bright, went out from amongst them, and passed up the street.

It was the last time they saw that proud, erect figure ; the last time they looked at those passionate eyes, full of sternest anger and deepest love ; the last time that Alexandre Delemont ever trod the streets of Protogno ; and only little Angela Biondino, the innkeeper's daughter, standing at her garden gate in her white dress, caught his parting words as he passed out of the town in front of their chalet inn—

“God forgive thee, Janette Chaudron !”

A week later Alexandre was found dead in the wood, not far from his cottage, having been torn to pieces by some savage beast, that had stolen on him unawares, for his gun was in his hand and his sharp hunting-knife was in his belt, showing he had been attacked suddenly and from behind, before he could defend himself. His body was not discovered till late the same afternoon, but the brave heart had then long ceased to beat, and his eyes could nevermore reproach the cruel, or shed bitter tears for those he loved.

Poor little Marie, with her white cap, and the red rose in her bosom, which he had given to her in the morning, knelt beside her husband's body as they laid him down on the kitchen floor, and stared at the face of her Alexandre with eyes that stiffened as they gazed. She did not speak or ask them any question, she only leaned forward a moment as if to touch comfortingly his lips, and then with a quivering cry, as of some despairing suddenly-revealed agony, she

stretched out her arms to Alexandre's mother, and fell prostrate beside her on the ground.

They lifted her up tenderly, with her little face as white and cold as her dead husband's, and laid her on the bed in the upper chamber. For a week she lay there all unconscious of sorrow or death, or of the approaching reunion with him she had lost. Her eyes were ever fixed in one long, upward stare, waiting, as it seemed to those who watched her, for the glory which was presently to be revealed to her ; and at six o'clock in the evening of a long and still summer's day, she passed away smilingly, with only that one long sigh of restful content, which tells us of "a faire countrie" reached, and of pain and sorrow merged in perfect and unending peace.

CHAPTER III.

THE WERE-WOLF.

THE death of Alexandre Delemont and his pretty girl-wife made a profound sensation in the town of Protogno, more profound even than could have been anticipated, for it is no very unusual thing for death to come into a household, and suddenly, without warning, to snatch away two, even more, of its family. Fever, pestilence, and famine have done worse than this, and no amazement has filled the breasts of those who heard, or thrilled their hearts with a nameless horror; but the tragedy enacted in Madeline l'Estrange's Wood, and the death in the Count's cottage, following so swiftly one upon the other, made a stir in the place which reached from one end of the canton to the other. Every chalet on the hill-sides, up to the very crests of the mountains, heard the story; every detail that tongue could invent or malice suggest blew this cloud, small as a man's hand, of village life and death, into a storm black enough to darken the very heaven itself; but as yet the cloud did not burst, or the hurricane of popular feeling descend in a rushing rain of passion and vengeance. Another event, even more sinister than those which had preceded it, had still to be added to their accusatory list, and one, too, which unfortunately needed no word-painting or exaggeration to increase its horrors.

Those who undertake to tell the whole sad history

of the events which followed upon Christine's arrival at the Count's cottage, and whose strange particulars cannot now be verified or corroborated, add many curious particulars and circumstances to those already related, which preceded and quickly succeeded Christine's advent to her son's house. They are so trivial in themselves as to be scarcely worth mentioning, but they bore a sinister aspect at the time, and were repeated with ominous shakes of the head by the credulous and superstitious inhabitants of the town and canton.

It was, for instance, generally accepted as a truth that on the morning of the day when Christine was expected at the forester's cottage, Marie, sitting at her kitchen fire-side, airing snowy linen for her mother-in-law's apartment, heard some strange and continuous cries in the wood at the rear of the house, and going out to ascertain their cause, saw a wolf in a far-off thicket, pursuing some white object round and round the stems of a clump of fir-trees. To Marie it appeared like the figure of a child, and its cries were so human and pitiful that a sudden terror filled the mother's heart, and rushing back into the house to see that her own infant, whom she had left sleeping in his cradle, was safe, she found little Paul lying in a faint on the kitchen floor, exhausted and weeping, with a mark on his cheek as if some wild animal had torn him with its claws or teeth.

Christine Delemont arrived that evening, and was received with great affection by her daughter-in-law, who, though amazed and much alarmed by the events of the morning, would not on any account trouble her guest or her husband on their arrival with such a mysterious and ill-omened narrative.

But again at night this strange, crying noise was heard, first at one side of the house, and then at the other, till at length Marie, growing terrified, roused Alexandre, who, looking out of the window, saw a wolf prowling around his cottage, and so close indeed did it pass beneath the casement that he had no difficulty in seeing its hideous, bristling form. He fired without hesitation, and evidently wounded the beast, for it retired howling into the forest; and it was said that Alexandre immediately noted to his wife that this was no ordinary wolf which he had wounded, such as in winter time might come within the range of a human dwelling, but one of those rarely-seen tailless monsters, whose appearance was considered a sure presage of woe and direct trouble to the being who was unfortunate enough to encounter it.

Whether this statement was accurate or not, it was certain to even the least credulous of the townsfolk, that within a month of this wolf's appearance at the Delemonts' home, Alexandre was found dead in the forest, cruelly wounded and torn by some wild inhabitant of the woods, and that the grave had scarcely closed on his head before Marie, his wife, lay down and died, without illness and without pain, only just as a flower closes when the sun has set, blasted, the villagers said, by one who hated her and was jealous of the love given her by her husband.

After Marie's death, Christine seldom appeared in Protogno. Those who fill up the gap in her history say that she feared to face the good people of the place, that she crept into the town in the evening, and having made her purchases at the village inn, retired hastily, looking at every one she met with scared

eyes, and muttering always to herself as she walked along.

It was also on record that on one occasion, returning in the twilight towards her home, a few weeks after her son's death, she met Silvestro Milano, and his son Pierre, coming down the hill towards the town. They were in earnest conversation, and they did not heed, or indeed see her, until they were close upon her, and then they would have hastily passed her by.

But Christine, suddenly stretching out her arms, with wild eyes and excited manner, stood in the middle of the road and stopped them.

"Silvestro," she cried, bitterly, "wilt thou also pass on like the rest, nor give to the widow and childless a word of pity?"

Silvestro, surprised and somewhat alarmed at this unexpected encounter and the disturbed manner of the woman who addressed him, paused hesitatingly.

"I remember," she cried, in the same voice of anguish, "when thy mother lost her husband, and when all the world fled from the fever, nine nights and nine days I sat by her bedside; aye, and I rocked *thee*, too, on my knees, seeking ever to comfort and console her; and now thou also turnest thy face from me and hardenest thy heart against me. I call upon thee, Silvestro, in the name of a just God, to stand by me now; I charge thee to defend me from the tongues of the wicked and the envious. If it pleased Heaven to give me in my youth a cup overflowing with blessings and the comfort and support of a great and true love, must I now in my old age drink the very dregs of bitterness, and pay with my very heart's blood for the empty life of another and less fortunate woman? I

know the envious tongue that has maligned me and the power it has to harm me, but thou, Silvestro, surely thou wilt raise thy voice in my favour. What! are my hands stained with blood? or are my eyes too full of dangerous cruelty that thou and this boy should shrink thus away from me; I, the wife of Nicolas!"

She ended her appeal with a stifled shriek of pain, and rushed past them up the hill.

Silvestro stood paralysed on the road, looking after the unhappy woman with eyes full of sorrow and amazement, while Pierre, white with terror, clasped his father by the hand, and sought to draw him forward out of so dangerous a neighbourhood.

Meantime, little Paul, too young and innocent to know of all these troubles, wandered day after day in the sunny flower-garden of the cottage; for though Marie's deft fingers roamed no more amongst the lilies and the roses of her pleasure ground, still they requited her past care, and poured out their rich scents into the air. The cottage, too, covered from the roof down to the ground with some brilliant creeper, shone like a ruddy star in the dark surroundings of the pine forest, and remained, despite the tragedy which had lately been enacted in its vicinity, a subject for artistic eyes to dwell upon and for ordinary observers to gaze at with delight.

But little Paul, lonely and oppressed with the stillness of the house, wandered hither and thither, searching ever with wistful eyes for the lost faces and forms of those he had loved so well, and whom, alas! he might never see again. He could only just walk without help, nor had his lips yet learnt to utter the thoughts of his heart; for, with a strange fatality, or

perhaps prevision of coming parting, his parents had succeeded in teaching him but one expression, and that an expression of ordinary use, "À Dieu." Thesetwoshort syllables the child uttered with a curious distinctness and a still more strange and afflicting pathos; and now, straying amongst the forsaken flower-paths beneath the dark shadows of the pines, where so often he had been carried, clasped tightly in his mother's arms, or running happily by her side, he wearied the air with the one heart-aching cry, "À Dieu, à Dieu, à Dieu!"

How his grandmother watched over him or sought to fill the place of the lost father and mother, none could tell. Some few of those whose occasional business had brought them near to or within the boundaries of the cottage, and whose minds were comparatively unprejudiced, said that, overpowered and bowed down with her own bitter and complicated griefs, this poor forsaken woman tended the child with a zealous and affecting love, trembling almost at the fall of a withered leaf or the cry of the wild birds in the woods; and amongst these few and charitable neighbours who spoke well of old Christine was Marie Fedele. She had known the Delemonts in her girlhood, on their first arrival in the town; and later on, after their death, she came as a young and lovely bride to spend a long afternoon on the borders of the wood with her husband, who was an artist by profession, and who, not appalled by the sad antecedents of the place, had brought his wife to sit by his side while he sketched the picturesque surroundings; for, struck by the rare beauty of the cottage, in its crimson robe of climbing flowers, he had determined to reproduce it on his canvas.

What Marie Fedele saw that summer afternoon,

when she peeped over the flower-trellised hedge into the dead Marie's garden, no one ever knew; but when she returned to her husband her eyes were wet with tears, and her voice trembled so that she could scarcely speak, while she told him in a low, sobbing voice, that she had seen little Paul, that his face was so fair that God's angels could not exceed it in beauty; but she had also seen a sight so sad that as long as ever she lived she could never forget it; and by-and-by her husband, going down to the edge of the wood, saw with his own eyes this lovely apparition, and forthwith transferred it to the foreground of his canvas, hoping later on to make it a study for a separate picture. But from that day forth Marie could not look upon the likeness without a sinking at her heart, or at the face of little Paul without a burst of compassionate tears, while in later and sadder days she had this painting framed and hung up in an upper chamber, where loving eyes might seek it without fear and recall the vanished past.

But there were those who gave quite a different history of Christine's care of, and affection for, her grandchild, and who, dark as the past had been, darkened it with ten thousand additional horrors. In their eyes old Christine Delemont was neither more nor less than a witch, a God-forsaken woman, whose life was appointed to be a bane and a terror to all who came in contact with her or within the range of her ill-omened presence. If one yielded credence to all these stories, one would have to believe tales so dark and strange of the doings of this deserted home, that one could not but shudder at the very name of so inhuman a woman; and many people were even found to swear that they had been eye-witnesses of

Christine's mysterious and cruel doings: how they had seen little Paul beaten and dashed upon the floor of the cottage, and dragged by the hair of his head about the garden. How, also, flames were seen at night-time issuing from the doors and windows of the house, and direful howlings and groanings were heard both by day and night in the woods around. And strange and appalling as were these stories, few voices were raised to deny them, or other tales as extraordinary, which were freely adduced to darken the history of Christine and her grandson.

But even these wild reports might have found in time few believers, and have perished for want of evidence, had it not been for other and fresh circumstances which, only too terrible in their reality, occurred a few months subsequent to the death of the forester and his wife, and which fanned into a fiery blaze the smouldering doubts and suspicions of the village folk, who had known and loved the young Delemonts in their brief span of married life, and who took a keen interest in the future of their little son.

It was late on an autumn afternoon, when the reapers, who had been toiling all day under a blazing sun, were returning from their work into the little town of Protogno. Many had taken off their broad shady hats, so that the little breeze which had sprung up with the decline of the sun might blow through their hair and cool their over-heated heads. As if by one accord they filed down the main street of the town, neither halting at house or shop until they reached the market-place, in front of which stood the Fountain of St. Agnes, and whose bright and cool waters had an attraction for their parched lips which

only those who, like themselves, had toiled all day long under a meridian sun, could understand. Besides, this fountain was, as it were, the village club. As the hour of six tolled from the high bell-tower of the church which crowned the summit of an overshadowing hill, not only the workmen from the fields, but artisans, shopkeepers, and, above all, the village gossips assembled round the Fountain of St. Agnes, which, with its shady row of trees, and comfortable benches set here and there in every nook and corner, made a most inviting resting-place; and here the village politics, the daily doings, the births, deaths, and marriages of the little town were chronicled with more or less solemnity as the importance of the cases required.

This evening the fountain, with its picturesque and quaint carvings, looked particularly tempting, for the sun, which was setting in a crimson flood of light behind the hill, had caught the market-place with its last and most lovely rays, and the fountain, the trees, and the waters tossing high up into the rose-coloured air, looked more like some painted scene in a theatre than the quiet and every-day resort of the poor and the weary. The benches were speedily filled with those who had already quenched their thirst, their bright sickles lying at their feet on the ground, or hanging from the branches of the trees above their heads. Many were still gathered around the base of the fountain, satisfying their thirst, while a few, who could not find a place by the fountain itself, handed their tin pannikins over the heads of their neighbours into some friendly hands, which returned them again filled with the fresh water their parched throats so much coveted to taste.

But all at once, while the jest and the laugh went round, and Frau Gartmann, the queen-gossip of the town, was quizzing in a covert whisper a handsome couple who stood near the fountain, chatting playfully with each other, there was a sudden hoarse cry of horror and surprise raised amongst the crowd, and, as if to add to the theatrical appearance of the scene, a man suddenly appeared in their midst, whose blood-stained garments, blanched face, and panic-stricken eyes carried a sudden terror into the hearts of all who looked upon him.

It was no other than Silvestro Milano, a reaper like themselves, who had been out all day cutting corn in a distant field near Madeline l'Estrange's Wood. He was a brave and honest-hearted fellow, courageous as a lion, and tender-hearted as a woman, and now he stood among them with his blouse stained with gore, and hanging in ribbons from his bleeding arms; his sickle also had been dipped in blood up to its wooden handle, and he staggered, as he approached the fountain, like a drunken man. He gazed around him at first in a vacant way, and then, pointing towards the fountain, he stretched out his torn and bleeding arm. The neighbours understood his unspoken request, and instantly a score of pannikins running over with clear water were pressed upon his acceptance.

He drank deeply, and then, tottering towards a seat, sank upon it, and remained for some time in a semi-unconscious state, unable to answer the questions of those who pressed around him, and yet looking at them with an anxiety in his eyes which told of a troubled spirit within.

At last he spoke, and so great was the silence that

ensued that a grasshopper on a neighbouring tree could be distinctly heard rasping out its evening call.

"I have met the accursed wolf that killed Alexandre Delemont in the forest, and I have slain it. It is now lying cold and dead in the flower-garden where I plunged this sickle into its heart."

At these words a murmur, which had been gradually rising out of the previous hush, now burst into a loud shout or yell of triumph and applause.

"Bravo, bravo, Silvestro ! tell us, good friend, how did it all happen ?" cried the foremost of the group, as they pressed forwards to catch his gasping efforts at speech.

"Aye, aye ; give me time, give me time ; for the horror of the thing is still upon me, and I fancy even now I hear the cry of the miserable child."

"What child ?"

"Peace, peace ! leave me a moment to recall my thoughts. Aye, it was thus that it happened. I had finished my reaping for the day, and I was weary ; my back ached and my head was giddy from the long stooping under the most burning sun that ever crossed the sky ; so, withdrawing under the shadow of a tree close by the Count's cottage, I sat down to rest, and presently I fell asleep. I do not know how long I slept, but I awoke feeling something soft touching the back of my hand, and then my cheek. I opened my eyes quietly, thinking perhaps a lizard or field mouse had run up my coat-sleeve, when, standing by me, I saw a little child, all dressed in white. I tell ye," cried Silvestro, raising himself up in his excitement, and almost rising to his feet as he spoke, "I tell ye, good folk, I thought it was a vision sent from Heaven. The babe was fair as wax, and beautiful as the child

which the Madonna carries in her arms. Its hair, which was of the purest flaxen, hung long over its shoulders, and its eyes gazed into mine as if it sought to gain my love.

"For a moment, awaking as it were from a dream, I thought in my confusion it was our blessed Lord Himself standing once more as a child on the earth beside me—that He had a message, perhaps, to give me; but presently, seeing the boy smile and stretch out his hands to me, I shook off the foolish impression, and I cried out encouragingly, 'Eh, little one, to whom dost thou belong?'

"It smiled again, and with a clear sweet voice it answered me strangely enough, 'À Dieu.'"

Again a low sympathetic murmur rose around Silvestro, but it came chiefly from the women, and there was the sound of a dry sob not far off, followed by the words, "Go on, go on—what next?" and Silvestro, looking up, saw, through a haze of weakness, the lovely face of Marie Fedele gazing earnestly at him.

"Aye, what next?" he repeated, as if questioning himself, for a faintness was stealing over him and his mind was growing clouded and uncertain; "I cannot just now remember what came next, only I know the child, hearing a sound in the garden, turned anxiously and hurried from me, but it cannot have been many minutes, when crossing the field on my way home I heard a piercing cry. May I never hear such a cry on this earth again!" said Silvestro, as he passed his hand languidly across his forehead. "I stopped, and turning towards the cottage, I listened. There was silence for a space, and I was thinking of continuing my way home, when I heard the same cry

once more, only this time even more bitter in its anguish, and repeated again and yet again.

"I did not hesitate now, but ran as fast as my feet could carry me towards the spot from which the sound came; and as I drew near to the garden hedge, just where a narrow path leads down across the bridge into the forest, I saw a wolf, dark, large, and terrible to look at, hurrying down this very path with something white in its mouth, which all at once I perceived to be nothing else than the child which had stood before me but a few minutes previously, smiling in the security of its innocent trust and love.

"Yes! but the sight was so pitiful, my very limbs seemed to grow weak with horror, and though I strove to run, my legs doubled under me like hemp-stalks. I know not how I ran, nor how often I stumbled in this nightmare chase, until I came on a lock of fair flaxen hair torn from the little one's glossy head and caught on a bramble at my side, and then, as it were, the strength and courage of something more powerful than myself seemed to enter into me. I stumbled no longer, but cutting through the thicket I doubled on the beast, and came, for a moment, face to face with its burning eyes and its bristling mane, while the child still drooped from the creature's mouth, and its white arm trailed along the ground."

"Ah, say no more; it is not dead?" sobbed Marie Fedele, as she laid her head on her husband's shoulder and hid her face from view.

"Have patience for a moment. When I am questioned I lose the thread of my thoughts." Once again Silvestro passed his hand across his eyes as if to hide

out some vision of horror, and then he proceeded slowly.

“It turned, the great coward, as I drew my sickle from my belt, and, fearing to meet me, it leaped over a low bush, and made back with haste across the wooden bridge towards the house. I saw then what I had to deal with—no common brute such as God Himself places in the forest, but one of those tailless monsters whose existence until now I had never believed in : a wicked were-wolf, with slinking steps, whose every movement filled me with disgust. Full of some strange and ever-increasing strength, I followed after it, gaining each moment on its track, though it hurried forward with ever longer and more sinuous steps. At last, driven as it were almost to bay, it took the direct path towards the cottage, and, slinking through the narrow garden gate, passed in. At once I saw my advantage ; I closed the gate with a sudden click that sent the hasp straight into the lock, and then, unless it dashed in at the open house-door, it had no hole or possible outlet for escape. Round and round the garden I hunted it, my sharp sickle ever in my outstretched arm, until at last, with a kind of crying snarl, it dropped the child from its blood-stained jaws, and, turning with a sudden fury towards me, it sprang forward to meet me. It was its last hope, its last chance for life, and verily I gave myself up for lost ; but seeing the child lie in a white heap on the gravel path, the same infant which had stood before me so lately in its purity and love, I thought of Him who carries the little lambs in His bosom, and though the beast leaped on me, and as it were wrestled with me, and though I felt its jaws snap on my shoulder and its claws tear

the flesh from my arm, still the good God guided the weapon in my hand so that I struck it right home to its craven heart, and with a kind of human cry it fell backwards upon the flower-beds behind us, and then rolled over on its side, dead ; aye, dead." Silvestro paused : " Aye, dead and stiff, as I shall be myself by-and-by."

It was not a murmur, but a loud yell of stunning overpowering applause which followed on the recital of Silvestro's victory ; but he motioned to them to be quiet, and taking up his story from where he had left off, he continued—

"When I saw that the beast was dead, and would no more rise to attack us, I leaped over its carcase, and stepping across a bed of roses and lavender, I came to the spot where the child still lay, to all appearances dead. I stooped to raise it in my arms, but as I did so I heard behind me a loud, sharp cry of pain or anger or surprise, and looking up, I saw Christine Delemont rushing out of the cottage towards the child ; she pushed me aside with a frantic gesture, and when I would have stretched out my arm to stay her, she rushed past me and herself lifted up the little one, whose head hung quite loosely to one side, and whose white frock was all stained with blood.

"I know not whether it was a wild despair or a fierce anger or a mad fit which had come over the woman, but Christine screamed and beat herself on her breast and tore her hair from her head, and at length she rushed into the house with the boy in her arms, and the door slammed behind her in my face, in my very face ! and though I sought to follow after her, she either did not or would not hear me. I waited in the garden and paced up and down the paths till I

grew weak from loss of blood. It was all in vain. At last I turned back and tapped at a window, the curtain of which was drawn. I felt too weak to return without a glass of wine or something wherewith to strengthen myself ere I ventured on the long walk home, but I could obtain no answer; only just as I moved aside, I heard a voice inside the room raised as it were in bitter anguish, and crying aloud, 'Speak, speak, in the name of God, speak, child, speak!' And then, like as it were a sigh or a sound of some far-off voice, I heard the words '*À Dieu,*' and I knew it was the babe I had seen in the wood, and I offered up thanks that it still lived."

"Now, Heaven be praised!" cried Marie Fedele; "for if ever there was an angel on earth, it is that child."

"Aye," cried Frau Gartmann, "and if ever there was a foul witch, it is Christine Delemont. From the day she entered that cottage until now, death and destruction have followed in her path."

"Yes," cried a third, "she is a witch, and worse than a witch. It is well known that she keeps that miserable child as a decoy to entice those she hates into her power, and afterwards to wreak her vengeance on them. Ah, the wretch! She ought to be shot through the heart herself; the were-wolf will not cease to haunt the town till her own heart's blood has been spilled."

"How so, Janette?" cried several voices in the crowd; "Did not Silvestro slay it with his sickle?"

"Aye, aye, he slew the shadow, but the real wolf is bound up in the heart of that wicked woman, and, believe me, she will never cease to revenge herself on all who come within her reach until the sickle is

plunged into her own bosom. Let those who do not know what a were-wolf is, ask me," cried Janette Chaudron; "I can tell them all about it."

"Then how came it to pass that Christine called on God in her anguish? Didst not thou say so, good Silvestro?" said Marie Fedelev, her voice tremulous with anger; but if any explanation was given to her question it was lost in the murmur of the crowd, for Silvestro Milano, while speaking, had suddenly fainted away upon the bench, and as his tall son Pierre and others lifted him up tenderly in their arms, it was noticed how, all the time he had been relating his adventure, a pool of blood had been gathering on the ground at his feet.

CHAPTER IV.

A PRAYER FOR REVENGE.

IN a week from the day on which Silvestro Milano appeared amongst them at the Fountain of St. Agnes, the villagers of Protogno were once more gathered around him—not, however, to hear again his tale of horror, or to yield a hoarse applause to his daring act of bravery, but to stand reverently and silently by while his lifeless body was laid in the ground, and to add their tears to those shed by the widow and the orphan son, who had indeed lost in Silvestro the noblest and tenderest of husbands, and the most loving and indulgent of fathers.

The churchyard was so crowded by those who had known Silvestro Milano in his honest earnest life that one could scarce find standing-room, and the grave in the green sward was literally covered over with branches, and wreaths of sweet flowers, gathered from field or garden by loving and grateful hands.

When the funeral was over, the widow of Silvestro went home to weep and pray, and to crave strength to bear the long, lonely life before her; but Pierre, her son, went forth from the graveyard with no prayer in his heart. Those who knew the lad, and his deep affection for his mother, wondered how he stood by the grave apparently unconscious of her presence or her grief: never once did he lift his eyes to heaven, or join in the last "Amen" which concluded the burial service. When the grave had been filled in he still

stood there, and only at the suggestion of a neighbour did he offer his mother the support of his arm, and walk with her to the door of their dwelling.

That some burning thought or question occupied his mind was clearly to be seen; his abstraction was almost pitiful to witness; the deadly pain at his heart was made manifest in the cheek, white almost to greyness, and by the trembling of the usually firm and closely curved lips.

"The poor lad is stunned; he scarcely knows the ground he stands on," said one, looking back compassionately from the churchyard gate as, the service being over, the villagers streamed homewards.

"Yes, yes, he was quite a madman about his father; they will do well to keep an eye on him for a while," said another,

"I would not be his enemy," said a third; "he had a look in his eye this afternoon that meant mischief; and they were saying at the forge last night that it is Christine Delemont he is so bitter against; that she is at the root of all this trouble, and has Silvestro's death to answer for as well as for all the others."

"Who says so?" asked Marie Fedele, somewhat sharply, as she paused on the little rustic bridge and looked the speaker full in the face.

"Why, nearly all of them. Frau Gartmann and Janette Chaudron are certain of it. It is not to be denied that Christine cast an evil eye on Silvestro that day she met him on the road. Pierre was with him and was scared out of his senses with her wild words and furious manner."

"Ah, so stories grow!" cried Marie, contemptuously. "I had the whole story from Silvestro's own lips. He had no fear, only great pity for her;

he would be the first to stand up for her now, if he were alive."

"That is more than Pierre will do," said the first speaker ; but Marie, deigning no further argument, walked on with a grave and troubled face.

Meanwhile Pierre proceeded slowly homewards with his mother. They lagged far behind the village folk, but neither of them spoke. Once or twice Pauline Milano drew her son's arm tightly towards her heart and moaned, and at this movement Pierre started nervously from his reverie ; the first time he kissed her passionately, but at the next pressure he stamped on the ground and looked so terrible in his anger that even she did not dare to question the cause.

That evening, before the first solemn sun had set on his father's peaceful resting-place, Pierre left his mother's home, and walking through the town, took the turn which led up through the vineyards to the ruined fortress of Protogno, beneath the remains of which, in a hovel formed out of the fallen rubbish, lived Janette Chaudron, the reputed witch-doctor.

Those who saw him wondered that he had not remained at home with the poor newly-made widow, to comfort and console her. They noticed, too, how he staggered, like one blind, up the stony zigzags of the lane ; and others who were coming down the hill, with their baskets of ripe grapes on their shoulders, told how his eyes were full of a wild agony, and that he saw neither them nor the path he trod on.

It was night-time before Pierre returned to his mother's house : the sun had set, and a pale moon had risen, and all the town was still as death. Pauline was watching for him at the gate, and stretched out her hands to him yearningly, but he

merely tendered to her the usual "good night kiss," and, with a haste which to her appeared almost unfeeling in its abruptness, he sought the quiet and concealment of his own apartment, the door of which he made fast with the key, a circumstance which, from its unusualness, aroused the surprise and almost the anger of his mother.

Still, in her heart of hearts, Pauline made allowance, aye, ample allowance, for this apparently capricious and unsympathetic conduct of her son. If ever a father had been worshipped with an unquestioning and devoted love, she knew Pierre had worshipped his. He had looked up to Silvestro as to one superior to all the rest of the world, and he would have been content to lie in his shadow like a dog. A word of praise from his father was treasured up in Pierre's heart like priceless gold, while a hint, even a glance, which spoke of blame or displeasure, filled it with the bitterest pain. To him the death of Silvestro meant despair, utter desolation, and the sudden uprooting of all the hopes and projects which had hitherto filled his young and ardent mind. No wonder, then, that on such a day, with such a rage of sorrow in his heart and burdening his spirit, he should seek the relief of solitude, where tears which men are ashamed to shed in public might fall freely and without comment. Pauline did not know, she did not even faintly guess, where Pierre's steps had led him that evening. She had fancied him seated in some lonely spot on the hill-side, sobbing out the grief which, even in her presence, he shrank from displaying, or perhaps walking in the woods with his friend Antoine Fedele, and craving from him the sympathy which one young heart naturally seeks from another.

She did not know of the live coal of anger which her son had carried in his bosom all this long and weary day of grief and parting: she saw his eyes gleaming with repressed excitement as he lifted the latch of the garden gate and passed through, but she did not suspect how a malign breath had meanwhile blown this coal to a white and pitiless heat, nor, happily for her, imagine the dawn of a great and terrible vengeance in her son's heart. That his sorrow had not been quenched by his absence that evening she had ample evidence, for, wakeful and restless herself, she came oftentimes during the night to her son's door, and ever was met with the same heart-rending sounds of sobs and groans, which seemed to issue from a bruised and withering spirit.

But about four o'clock in the early morning, when Pauline herself had only just retired to rest, she heard the bolt of Pierre's door being withdrawn, and in another moment he had entered her room, and stood beside her bed.

"Mother."

"What is it, my son?"

"Mother, I need some money."

"Money?"

"Aye, gold!"

"Gold, my son?"

"Yes, gold—gold; I know thou hast some in thy escritoire; hasten, please, to give it to me, for I am in sore need of it."

"I cannot give thee the gold that is in my escritoire, Pierre; it is at this moment due to others."

"To whom is it due?" he said, angrily, with kindling eyes, and an ever-increasing excitement of manner.

"That does not signify to thee. I need the gold, and thou canst not have it. It is but the one piece which remains to me of——" Pauline Milano's voice trembled as she spoke, and she broke off suddenly.

"Of what, mother?" demanded Pierre, impatiently.

Pauline did not answer; she made an effort to reply, but no sound issued from her lips.

"If thou wilt neither answer me, nor give me the money I need, I must e'en seek it for myself," cried Pierre, speaking like one beside himself, and, turning hastily from the bed, he moved towards the table.

"Pierre, art thou mad? do not attempt to touch that gold, it is not thine."

"I cannot help that, it is mine now." Pierre had opened the box, and the gold was already clasped in the palm of his hand.

"Pierre, Pierre! listen to me. That money was thy father's; it is now due for his grave. Come back, Pierre, come back!"

"His grave shall be paid for, and his death too. It is for that purpose I need it, so leave that to me," he replied in hoarse tones, as he closed the door of the room and went down the staircase; and the next moment Pauline heard the châlet door forced violently open, and the sound of footsteps hastily retreating down the garden path.

Wolf, Pierre's favourite watch-dog, leaped from his box with a hoarse bark, aroused by the unusual and early clamour, and then sprang forward to greet the lad; but his master had no word for him this morning, and with a low whine of disappointment he crept back into his kennel, his chain grating discordantly against the wooden boards of his den. He had scarcely held up his head, poor dog, since Sil-

vestro Milano's death, and his dismal howls had been interpreted by the neighbours as foreboding fresh sorrow to the unfortunate house ; but what sorrow could fall more heavily on the poor deserted widow within ? what grief could be more poignant than hers who, with a bitter cry, had now flung herself on the floor of her room, and lay writhing there in this the darkest and most cruel hour of her life ?

It was thus, prostrate, exhausted, indeed well-nigh insensible, that Pierre found her when, some hours later, he returned to his home. His face had darkened with a blush of ruddy shame as he pushed open the door of his mother's room, but now it changed to a sudden pallor. He hastened to her side and, kneeling on the floor beside her, he raised her up in his arms tenderly. He poured forth all the most loving and affectionate words which his tongue could utter. He stroked her ruffled hair with his hands, and kissed the poor tear-stained eyes, but he could draw forth no responsive word, no reply to the outpoured passion of his heart ; he had wounded a stricken soul and cruelly trampled upon a bruised reed, and though he watched by her side till the sun rose high in the heavens, he could catch no word of forgiveness, only sobs and groans and sometimes bitter cries of distress. At length, worn out with her excitement and sorrow, Pauline fell asleep ; then Pierre laid her quietly on her bed, and watched beside her for a time, but presently some far-off sound appeared to rouse him from his reverie ; a distant wail of pain or sorrow seemed slowly rising on the still autumn air. Pierre rose and walked to the chalet window, through which came in a delicious scent of violets and roses rising up from the garden beneath. He shaded his eyes with his hands and

gazed eagerly in the direction of the voice, but there was nothing to be seen ; the cry seemed as it were suspended in the blue atmosphere, between heaven and earth.

Pierre drew one sharp breath of pain, then turned quickly back into the room. He stopped only one moment, just to touch his mother's cheek with his burning lips, and then, once more hastily descending the chalet stairs, he strode quickly out upon the road and fled with rapid steps along the village street.

When he reached the quiet lane which, turning off at an angle, led up the hill-side towards the one small cemetery of the town, he paused, and waited for some further sound or sign of life, but all was still as the death-sleep which reigned within its low and vine-clad walls. Pierre pushed open the little gate which led by a short cut to the chapel and to the new-made grave in its shadow, but once beside it he stopped and gazed with open eyes and parted lips.

Only that morning he had lain on that narrow mound with his face pressed to the dull, moist earth which, brown and bare, except for the faded flowers of yesterday, was heaped upon his father's grave. But now ! glowing at its head lay a wreath of deep red, crimson flowers, lately gathered, for its fragrance filled the air with perfume, while at the foot had been placed a wreath of snow-white blossoms mixed with violets, still damp with dew, and on the soft clay was distinctly visible the print of a child's sockless foot.

Some sudden start of pain or rush of uncontrollable feeling filled Pierre's eyes with unexpected tears. It was, however, but a transitory sentiment, for other and darker thoughts speedily thrust out all softer reflections. Pierre stooped with a hasty movement of

anger, and snatching up the red wreath first, he tore its blossoms into a thousand atoms and ground their fragments into the earth with his heel, where, bruised and rent, they looked like heavy drops of blood disfiguring the grave. The white wreath he treated with a more careless disdain, merely taking it in his hand and casting it with a gesture of disgust into the rank grass beside him.

"Father!" he cried, hoarsely, as he turned once more to the rough cross of wood which formed temporarily the headstone of the grave—"Father, if thou couldst only hear me; if thou couldst only help me to revenge thy cruel death; if I might but know where thou art; if thou couldst only say one word to ease my soul, to drive away this agony of pain, of doubt! Speak, father, speak; my father, where art thou? Where art thou gone? Pierre strained the cross almost from the earth in the fervour of his grief and longing, then raised his head expectantly as if hoping for some miraculous reply.

It came, fit answer to his prayer, in a child's voice, pure and plaintive, breathed as it were from the clouds above the distant pine-trees: "*À Dieu, à Dieu!*"

CHAPTER V.

FOILED AGAIN.

FOUR years had elapsed since the day of Silvestro Milano's funeral. His grave was now green with grass, and soft with moss and fibrous roots, and all over it bloomed sweet-scented flowers, carefully tended by Pierre and his mother, who had erected around it a wooden paling to preserve the sacred plot of ground from desecration or intrusion.

Pauline Milano came there daily to pray and to weep for the husband who had been her faithful and loved companion for fifteen years. Time had not softened her loss or made her life appear less lonely and bereft of joy ; but the affliction had softened her heart, and made her more considerate, more forgiving, towards others, and raised her thoughts towards the contemplation of a holier and happier life, and though her bodily frame daily waxed weaker and weaker under the great sorrow which had fallen upon her, her spirit was gaining in strength, and her hopes were now centred in the happy meeting which she trusted she would soon be permitted to enjoy in a new and brighter land.

But with Pierre it was quite different ; he had but small belief in a future state ; the land where all tears are wiped away and where sorrow is unknown, was to him as a painted picture, pleasant to look upon, but impossible of realisation. He had vague desires for belief, sudden moments too, when, with his strong

passionate nature, he could have given up all he possessed to grasp at some certain knowledge of a Saviour and a forgiving God, but these cravings were under evil influence daily becoming less strong. He was, as he grew older, continually imbibing the then too prevalent opinions of the age and of his country that men were only answerable to their fellow-men for their actions, and that beyond the grave there was neither reward nor retribution. His father's cruel death, brought about as he believed by Christine's machinations, his mother's failing life, were for him such terrible truths that nothing but blood could atone for them, and the vow which he registered daily over his father's grave kept those burning reflections always alive in his breast, ready to be fanned to fury at a moment's notice, while every time he gazed at his mother's worn and troubled countenance, he yearned with a fresh and hungry longing to pay back with blood for blood, and with sorrow for sorrow, the affliction which had fallen on his home and house.

Once indeed, about a month after Silvestro's death, Pierre had made a sudden but useless effort to surprise Christine in her house, and to carry out his revengeful purpose; and the disappointment which he had experienced on this occasion had only embittered his mind, and strengthened his resolution.

Accompanied by one or two evil companions who had, under much persuasion, promised to stand by him in this effort, and armed with the sickle which was still stained with the blood of the cruel were-wolf, Pierre had started in the early dawn and made his way rapidly across the hills, hoping to descend upon the cottage before the inmates were stirring, and thus to surprise them unawares.

But when they reached the house they had found it deserted and empty. The door that led from the garden into the dwelling lay wide open, and as Pierre and his friends stepped across the threshold, a startled bird flew out above their heads, and escaped screaming down the garden, while a great and ugly toad crawled across the passage into the adjoining room.

Pierre was fearless as he was furious in his blind anger, and though his comrades immediately took fright at these sinister tokens and shrank away into the woods, he walked proudly on and entered what had once been the pretty and brightly-furnished sitting-room of Marie Delemont, but which now, in its silent sadness, filled even his burning heart with a sense of gloomy sorrow.

The curtains, once bright and covered with roses, now loosened in many places from the pole above, hung in dismal drooping folds, and the pole itself had evidently served lately as a roosting-place for pigeons and bats. There was little to remind one of the pure and beautiful wife whose presence had made this room almost as holy as it had been happy, and still less to remind one of the unfortunate Christine or the little Paul, the causes of Pierre's bitterness of heart, except a rough wooden cart, filled with decaying and mouldy horse-chesnuts, which stood drawn up beside a now stained and moth-eaten couch.

In vain Pierre walked through the empty house and the cheerless vacant rooms; the little bed still stood in the room upstairs, with the impression of the small head left on the downy pillow; but this room, too, had been unoccupied for many days, perhaps weeks, and though the roses and woodbines looked in at the open window, there was an air of

decay and death in every part of the house and its surroundings.

Perhaps this might have been accounted for by the presence of the still unburied wolf, which, now dead for some weeks, lay prostrate on the garden bed, horrible in its decay alike to sense and sight, while outside the bed, which was still bright with crimson roses and lavender, the blood of the dead animal had trickled through the boxwood border and had dyed the adjoining path with a dark and unseemly stain.

When Pierre first approached the spot and caught a glimpse of the hideous beast, looking still more ghastly in the starkness of death, a sudden giddiness and faintness had overpowered him and he had leaned against the window-sill for support, the whole scene which his dead father had so graphically described rising before him in terrible distinctness ; but when he had restored himself and gained fresh strength by thinking over his wrongs, he went down that he might take a somewhat closer look at the savage brute that his father had so successfully worsted. His companions, who had shrunk away when he had entered the house, now gathered round him again, and, in company with him, they proceeded down the garden path to see the body of the wolf.

There it lay, already half a skeleton, in all the hideousness of its bloody death, its mouth open and its cruel teeth exposed in a harmless array of sharp and pointed fangs.

Pierre saw all this, but it was not what he had come to see. He placed his foot hurriedly under the broad back of the dead beast, and lifted it partially out from amidst the roses and thick-growing tangle

of flowers and leafage, that he might see if the story of the tailless wolf were true, or whether his father, in his terrible excitement, had been carried away to believe that for which there was no evidence. But Pierre's eyes dilated, and his breath came slowly and heavily, when he saw that the wolf before him was indeed one of those tailless monsters whose human nature had been upheld for centuries past, and the proof of whose unnatural existence lay now, without a shadow of doubt, at his very feet. Pierre was too faint and mentally overcome to gaze at it for more than a moment. He turned away from the dead animal with a gesture of disgust, but before doing so he pointed it out to his companions, and, merely saying, "You have all seen it for yourselves," moved away to the edge of the torrent which rushed passed the cottage, to wet his lips with a mouthful of its pure and ice-cold water.

Could Pierre but have known the true story of this maimed and dead wolf, what a different colour this incident might have assumed for him, and how small would have seemed to him the import of this now ominous incident!

Above in the forester's bedroom, nailed over the door, Pierre might even now have seen that which, had he heard the whole history, might have shaken his faith in the miraculous; and, could Alexandre's dead lips have spoken to him as he stood beside the tailless wolf in the garden, they would have told him how from the window above their very heads, on the night of Christine's arrival, he had fired at this same animal as it slunk past the cottage in the semi-darkness, so that it rushed off into the forest howling with pain; and how, in the morning, going out into his

garden, in almost the same spot where the dead wolf now lay, he had found the long, bushy tail of the monster, severed from its body by his bullet, lying across the garden path, tangled and gore-stained ; and how, well content with the effect of his hasty shot in the darkness, he had carried it in triumph into the cottage to show to his wife, and had afterwards fastened it up as a trophy over the door of their room. The wolf was indeed a gigantic one of its kind, and had evidently displayed an unusual courage in coming twice in one week so close to an inhabited house, but beyond this Alexandre bestowed no thought on the occurrence, except to warn Marie never to allow little Paul to stray alone in the garden, and to be careful herself how she ventured out about the place when he was not there to protect her.

Pierre knew none of these details, and, disturbed, disheartened, and distracted, he returned to his home that night completely puzzled and perplexed how and where to prosecute the search. He could no longer place any confidence in the assistance of outsiders, as all his companions, though sworn to stand by him, were ready to desert him at the first moment of difficulty, and Antoine Fedele, his best friend, he durst not ask to aid him. He had nothing to do now but to wait quietly and cautiously for the first symptom of Christine's return, or hint of her whereabouts, and meantime he would renew his vow day by day at his father's grave, and shut his ears to the voice of his mother, who pleaded the cause of the aged and heart-broken widow, and of the child whose life had been so dearly bought with the blood of her beloved and honoured husband.

CHAPTER VI.

ANGELA BIONDINA.

AND yet four years had passed away, and Pierre, though ever keenly on the watch, had heard no definite tidings of Christine. He never for an instant doubted that she still existed somewhere in the neighbourhood, and numerous though vague tales were constantly reaching his ears, which served to confirm him in this idea. Some were almost too wild to be believed even by his credulous and superstitious mind, but the fact that numbers of people declared they had seen her passing hither and thither like a phantom across the dry beds of torrents in remote paths on the hill-side, or wandering in the forest close to the Count's deserted cottage, could scarcely be controverted, and the hope that she would one day appear bodily in the town kept Pierre ever alert and on the watch. The sickle which had slain the wolf in the Delemont garden was still treasured by him as the sacred weapon with which he intended to end Christine's dark and mysterious life, and expiate her darker crimes, and now fresh vigour had been given to his purpose by the sight of little Paul himself; and though the pursuit had been fruitless, and he had been baulked once more of the capture of his prey, still it had served to convince him that their hiding-place was not far off, and that some day, be the time long or short, he would pin them to the earth, and

slake his thirst for vengeance in Christine's guilty blood.

There were other and sadder stories about Christine and her grandson which during these four years had also gained credence in Protogno, though none could tell exactly how they had originated. It was whispered at first, and now it had become well known, that poor little Paul, the lovely flower of the dead Marie's life, was what she herself, had she lived, would have pathetically termed "*aliéné*," estranged from the world and all the things of the world, and incapable of expressing in words the shadowy thoughts which seemed for ever passing behind those grave and guileless eyes. Some said that it was the sight of his mother's dead face which had suddenly dimmed the bright glass of his life, and clouded for ever the young and ardent imagination; others set it down unquestioningly to the day he was seized by the were-wolf, and carried helpless in its cruel jaws towards the forest. These believed that the lad was simply fear-stricken, and would eventually recover his faculties, while hundreds would have it differently, and still maintained that Christine's evil eye, and it alone, had purposely wrought this mischief, that with a subtle cruelty she might use this poor little child as a call-bird to attract the compassion or generosity of the neighbours, whose kindness she invariably requited with sickness, deformity, or death.

It was also well known that Christine had made an effort to leave the vicinity of Protogno and return to France. She had even proceeded as far as the neighbouring village of Wertensfeld, and had, as a stranger, requested hospitality at a small outlying farmhouse; but there her history and her crimes seemed to have

outrun her, for no sooner had she entered the little garden of the ch  let, weary and footsore, and leading little Paul by the hand, than she was recognised by the inhabitants and cruelly chased back towards Pro-togno with sticks and stones and curses, until darkness mercifully covered her retreat, and, turning into the forest which bordered the road, she made good her escape.

And how to entrap or catch this little call-bird or idiot, as some called him, was at the present moment the object of Pierre's life. Janette Chaudron had impressed this point on his mind. It was useless to search for Christine while Paul remained at large, but once cage the child and Pierre might almost feel sure of his prey. Janette herself had undertaken to take charge of the child when he was captured, and had sworn to Pierre that within a month after Paul's imprisonment Christine would certainly be secured, and now Paul had been almost within reach of Pierre's fingers at the fountain, and yet had again escaped him.

Pierre pondered night and day on this theme and on the strange disappearance of the child, a mystery which he could not unravel, for had he not had at the very moment when Paul vanished from him the charm around his neck, purchased by him so dearly from Janette on the night of his father's burial; and had she not also sworn to him on that occasion by the very hairs of her head, that as long as it remained in his possession he was proof against all the arts of demonology and witchcraft?

Sometimes his thoughts turned with renewed suspicion on Marie Fedele, and his lips curled with a proud disdain as he thought over her rebukes and

words of feeble, womanly reproach. Well, she, at least, should not baulk him again: that was the wisdom which his late disappointment had taught him. Next time he would creep on his adversary unawares; no shouts, no hallooing, no gathering of a noisy crowd. At the first sound of the childish cry, for which his ears were always on the alert, he would be strictly on his guard, and meantime he would hold further counsel with Janette, and make every step of his future course clear and safe before he entered upon it.

Still the long summer wore on and Pierre found himself no nearer the fulfilment of his wishes. The neighbours were busy cutting down the sweet-scented grass which grew luxuriantly, not only in the well-watered valley but also on the hill sides. Every house in the village turned out its contribution of willing hands to mow and rake and scatter the delicious herbage which, more than half composed of wild flowers, filled all the air with odour.

All day long the patient cream-coloured bullocks stood knee-deep in the ripe meadow-grass, while the skeleton-ribbed wooden carts to which they were harnessed were being filled with hay; and as they gazed with large lustrous eyes on the daisies and scarlet pimpernels starring the ground at their feet, the village children climbed on their necks, haunches, and heads, and tickled their ears with the fairy grass which grew in abundance on the knolls and in the dells of the meadows. Even the fairest and daintiest maidens of Protogno appeared among the workers in the field, their broad-brimmed hats, picturesque costumes, and light pine rakes, filling in all that was

necessary to make each separate field a picture delightful to the eye and pleasing to even the dullest and least artistic sense.

Even Angela Biondina, the innkeeper's daughter, and the loveliest girl in Protogno, did not disdain to join these busy toilers, and above all in the meadow beside Marie Fedele's chalet she might be seen working all the afternoon.

She had the smallest white hands imaginable; whiter even than Marie's own, and yet she never shrank from using them in the service of all who needed her help. She was also acknowledged to be the pattern daughter of the town, and, though only just seventeen, she could already manage all her father's accounts, and undertake as well a large share of the household work of the little inn. She even occasionally cooked for the guests who, arriving early or late, needed a hasty meal, for Michel, the old *chef* of the "Corona," was ailing and half blind, and the loss of an only son had rendered him of late stupid and forgetful. This was enough in itself to rouse Angela's energy, for the sight of sorrow or suffering was such misery to her sensitive nature that in every way she always sought about to see how she could relieve it. Now having left all tidy and in readiness for the arrival of the daily Poste, she appeared this afternoon emerging from the dark grove of pine-trees at the rear of the Fedele's chalet, like a vision of youth, beauty, and graceful health.

Her face, this afternoon, appeared even more radiant than usual, and the lovely peach-colour of her cheek had deepened to a more perfect tint. That some secret joy was filling her innocent heart none could doubt, as she advanced with light and joyous

steps, while her eyes brimmed over with happiness and sparkled with smiles.

"Ah! why didst thou not come an hour earlier, and I could have put thee into my picture?" exclaimed a voice from beneath a spreading chestnut tree; "it is all I wanted to complete the beauty of my landscape. See, now, where that black cow comes in by the rocks, I might, instead, have painted thee, only every one would have looked at the foreground and have forgotten the rest of the picture;" and Sebastian Fedele turned his canvas round for Angela's approval.

"It is indeed lovely, and that cow is my special favourite," exclaimed Angela, laughing and throwing herself down on a heap of hay, which stood, half sheltered from the rays of the sun, by the spreading chestnut-branches above; "it is a pity I arrived so late; but I delayed, talking to Pierre on the Pont d'Esprit, and before I knew almost where I was, the town clock sounded five."

"Ah, the time flew so fast?" asked Sebastian Fedele, looking up curiously at the lovely face whose delicate profile was turned towards him.

"Yes, *so* fast," sighed Angela, loosening the strings of her hat and leaning her head back against the fragrant hay, "I had so much to say to Pierre; I had waited so long for an opportunity to meet him alone, and it never came. At last, to-day, I was brave. I spoke out all in a hurry, without thinking or choosing my words, and now I am so happy."

"Thou art easily made happy if Pierre's words or looks can make thee so," replied the painter gloomily.

"Ah, you are too prejudiced; you think too badly of poor Pierre," said Angela, sadly.

"I could, in truth, scarcely think worse of any

one. Look only what he is making of our Antoine, who was as good a lad as ever breathed until Pierre, like a sullen black-beetle as he is, came undermining the ground beneath our feet, turning Antoine against poor Marie, who has been the best of mothers to him, softer and more indulgent to his failings and wishes than to the children she has borne herself. See now," cried Sebastian, his voice deepening with anger and his handsome face darkening as he spoke, "see this sketch;" Sebastian raised a canvas from the ground, whose surface was all blotted and disfigured with scratches and dashes of paint, "see, this is the effect of Pierre's teaching. Here was as neat a piece of colour as I have seen for a long time. Antoine has an eye for colour that a hundred years of study could not give to me. He sat by me here for two hours: we were as happy and earnest over our separate landscapes as if our very fame depended on their success or failure. All at once something occurs which annoys him. He starts up and turns on Marie, who had come out of the house, and who, being the bearer of some irritating news, is the innocent cause of this sudden passion. He storms, rants like a madman, and quotes Pierre and Pierre's sayings; finally, seeing that we, neither of us, are moved by his fury or threats, he dashes his painting, face foremost, on the grass and thistles yonder, and flings off into the wood, where he will no doubt sulk till night comes, and his better sense gains the victory. Ah," cried Sebastian, bitterly, "who can touch pitch and not be defiled? Antoine was a good lad, an honest lad, and an earnest lad. We were proud of the boy, Marie and I, even though we knew his faults, till that young Milano became his fast friend, with his godless principles, his

black heart, his revengeful purposes, and his strong nature preying upon the weaker and more sensitive, till Antoine now looks up to Pierre as to a god; his counsels are law while ours are despised, and all our words are questioned and cavilled at."

While Sebastian Fedele had been speaking Angela's lovely face had undergone a sudden and painful change; a chilling blight seemed to have passed over her frame, and when she strove to reply her voice was husky and distressed.

"I know Pierre is not good," she said, slowly; "he is revengeful and resolute, and, oh that one should have to say it! he does not love God; but he has a warm, loving heart, that I am certain of; and he ——" here her voice sank quite low, and the same sweet smile of happiness which had first shone on her face as she entered the field seemed creeping over her features again, "he has promised me——"

"He has promised thee, what? His love, perhaps," cried Sebastian, harshly.

"His love?" Angela looked up quickly at her companion with grave questioning eyes full of a pained astonishment until even Sebastian's eye sought the ground uneasily. "He has promised me that he will try and do better;" then with a quick, awkward effort she added, "he is coming to the church with me the next Sabbath;" and after an additional and more embarrassing pause, "Oh, if only——"

"Yes, if only, if only," replied Sebastian, bitterly, "if only the sky were to fall, we might perhaps creep into heaven by a new way. Ah, Angela, dearest one, I do not wish to grieve thy heart or mock at thy efforts, but I fear, as far as Pierre is concerned, it will be 'if only' to the end of the chapter."

"One can pray and hope," said Angela, almost in a whisper.

"Yes, truly one never knows what impossible things may happen, and under thy guidance Pierre may improve; but thou hast a stony rock to work upon, and a lazy sulkiness, or rather determination to meet and combat with, which I should be sorry to come across often. I have had one or two fights with the said lad myself, and he is an ugly customer to fall foul of; one may come off victorious in the long run, but every feather on one's body is ruffled, and one pities and despises in the same breath."

"Yes, 'pity,' that is the word; I do pity poor Pierre with all my heart. It must be so dreadful not to know the love of God, not to feel even a wish to please Him, and yet I am certain, I feel, that the poor boy is restless and dissatisfied with his life, that his heart craves for something higher and better, and that his conscience, through want of a fixed rule and a certain hope, is always creating a misery of its own, which is drawing him on from bad to worse. I often think if Marie would take him in hand——"

"Marie!" Sebastian uttered an expression almost of anger. "Marie, my Marie! Why, there is not a word that human tongue could utter or human love devise that she has not already pressed on him, even with tears; yes, that she has not wasted like pearls before swine; and, the ingrate, what has he done for her in return? He has made her life miserable, not only by his evil example and his bad ways, but also by his determination to thwart her in all her loving purposes, and to spy upon her actions. I hate to see that lazy, prying hound come crouching about our house or place. If it were not for his mother, his poor unhappy

mother, I would make this place so hot for him that he durst not show his nose here ; for with his dark, unprepossessing face he casts a shadow always on our happiness and home."

"And I, then, I have acted wrongly?"

"How so, Angela?"

"I blamed him just now that he was not at work like all the others. I reminded him that his mother's meadow was standing all uncut on the hill side, while my father's hay was already made and stored, and yours all but finished. He said to me, joking, in reply, 'I do not know how to make hay, but I will come and learn if you will teach me.' And I, I told him I was coming here to help Marie and the rest of the household, and he said," here Angela hesitated painfully, "he said he would follow me, he would come here by-and-by, in an hour or so."

"He would come here!" cried Sebastian, starting up suddenly, with a scared, angry face; "Pierre is coming here this afternoon! Why, Angela, why didst thou not tell me this sooner?"

"I, why, I;—thou frightenest me, Sebastian, with thy looks and thy reproaches. What harm can Pierre do thee? He is rough and rude, certainly, but—ah, pity! what have I done?" and Angela, weeping, threw herself upon the heap of hay by her side, as Sebastian, regardless of her words and questions, turned angrily away, and hurried with striding steps towards the chalet.

For many minutes Angela remained with her face pressed downwards on the hay, trying to control her sobs; she had too tender and easily wounded a heart for the every-day wear and tear of this rough world, and to be reproached by those she loved and respected

was a pain too deep for words. What had she said, what had she done, to arouse such sudden anger and dismay?

Why should Pierre's name cause such annoyance, and his advent such ill-concealed fear? What had Marie Fedele to dread from his presence? Hush! what was that sound? Could that be his step on the grass? and Angela looked up quickly, and hastily wiped away the tears from her eyes. She was almost more lovely, poor Angela, in her grief than in the joyous beauty of her every-day life, and now, with parted tremulous lips and eager glances of fear the expression of her face was beautiful in its distress. But there was no tall, lithe figure making its way through the shadow of the pine-trees, no dark face with deep questioning eyes advancing towards her to scan her tear-stained face and to seek the origin of her grief.

Angela sighed, a low sobbing sigh full of some secret pain, and then, lifting up her eyes above the pine wood, she lay back once more against the mound of hay and folded her arms behind her head.

The autumn evening was rich with wondrous and divers colours, the sky, blue with the pale tint of the forget-me-not, was cut across by the snow-covered peak of the mountains opposite; high up, suspended like a silver ball, a ghostly moon was hanging in the azure sky; over her head a film of gauzy humming gnats were rising and falling like the spray of some fairy fountain, and in the flower-spangled meadow grasshoppers were chirping and bees murmuring happily.

As Angela lay back and gazed above and around at the beauty of the landscape, she seemed involun-

tarily to forget the trouble which had caused her such quick and burning tears ; some softer and happier thoughts filled her mind to the exclusion of all other subjects, and in the stillness and seclusion of the field she spoke them aloud with an earnest, child-like simplicity.

"If earth is so lovely, so wonderfully lovely to the eyes, what must heaven be?" She uttered the last words with a slow, reverent questioning of tone, as if almost expecting some answer. "Ah, if wishing, longing, praying could bring us to heaven, I should be there now. To think even of that great joy makes my heart feel faint ; to see once more my mother and my little sister, my little angel sister!" Angela raised herself once again on her elbow and listened. It was as if the grass and flowers around were whispering in some soft inarticulate language, yet there was nothing to be seen save a large radiant-winged butterfly hovering over a purple thistle by her side.

"If I were one of God's angels and might visit earth, I would stand ever at Pierre's ear and whisper messages of love and forgiveness and mercy until he must perforce hear me."

"Hush! something surely is moving!" Angela half started to her feet, and her lips opened suddenly with a tremulous cry of wonder and fear ; but this she as quickly suppressed, gazing with parted lips in silent pity and amazement at a figure which had stolen softly and unexpectedly upon her summer reverie.

It was only a little child, a white-robed boy, who stood before her, with yellow hair, and a pale, almost colourless face, but Angela instantly became aware, as she gazed at him, with a swift flash of suddenly

aroused memory, that all was not well with the lad ; for the almost celestial beauty of his childish countenance was clouded with sadness, and in the upward pathetic glance which he fixed upon her, full of a sorrowful mute appeal, she noticed there was an absence of all worldly wisdom, of all natural guile, which, combined with his total silence, seemed to point but to one issue, namely, that the boy who had crept thus to her side in the fearless unconsciousness of a mind only half unfolded, was none other than the poor little "aliené," whom, years ago, she had seen at her father's inn, but whose appearance just now at this especial time might be fraught with terrible danger to himself and anguish to her.

In his closed hand, still soft with the dimples of childhood, the little fellow held clasped a scarlet blossom, which he extended towards Angela with a grave, sad smile, full of an unmeaning sorrow, and a silence more suggestive and touching than the sound of any words.

Angela bent forward and, returning his gaze with one full of the tenderest pity and loving recognition, she drew the little fellow towards her, and laid her hand soothingly on his glossy flaxen hair.

"And this is little Paul," she murmured to herself. "Was ever anything made by God more beautiful or more sad !" She took the child's hand in hers as she spoke, and laid her cheek against it, and drew him still nearer to her heart.

The boy placed his scarlet blossom on Angela's knee. He was soothed by her caresses ; and the endearing epithets which fell so naturally from her lips, as she held him closely to her, seemed to find an entry and an echo within his heart.

"And this is little Paul," Angela kept murmuring to herself. "Poor little Paul!" She gazed lingeringly into his face and sighed heavily, then added almost inaudibly, "How can Pierre talk of him as he does, or seek to injure a poor innocent like this! Ah, if he knew what God thinks of those that harm one of his little flock!"

Angela paused in her reflections, arrested by a sudden spasm of pain or fear which had passed over the child's face, and by the quick grasp of her hands, and the smothered cry of dread which issued from his lips.

"What is it? What dost thou fear? There is nothing in the wood to frighten thee." Paul's eyes were riveted on one point beneath the pine-trees, and the colour fled from his lips with a startling rapidity.

"It is nothing, nothing, my sweet one," said Angela, her own lips blanching with sympathetic fears; "here, come closer to me, it is only a dog barking in the distance; it cannot harm thee. See, Paul, see, this lovely butterfly," and with the hasty guile so often manifested by those learned in the mechanism of a childish heart, she added hurriedly, "If thou dost not turn round at once it will have flown away."

The effort was successful; Paul's attention was suddenly drawn by Angela's words from the contemplation of the pine wood to the outspread dazzling wings of the crimson butterfly, which now, attracted from the thistle by the more alluring beauty of the scarlet flower on the girl's knee, hovered gracefully above its petals.

"Is it not beautiful? Is it not a wonderful creature?" cried Angela, herself lost in admiration at its

radiant colouring. "Ah, little Paul, it is only in heaven one can paint such wings as those."

At the word "heaven" Paul once more lifted his eyes towards hers with a glance which Angela could not bring herself to return, so keen was the pain with which it stirred her tender, loving heart. It was so full of an earnest longing, an expectant hope, a joy almost realised, and yet it seemed to appeal to her for confirmation.

"Ah, see, he has settled on your hand ; do not move, Paul, or you will frighten him," cried Angela, struggling with her tears, and once again bringing the straying nervous mind back from its realm of shadowy fears and boundless hope.

A bright smile and a low sigh of content rewarded her for the effort. Paul now seemed engrossed by the beauty of the insect, which with a palpitating motion opened and closed the glories of its radiant wings, resting tranquilly all the time on the delicate pink of the child's wide-opened palm.

"Ah, he is a brave fellow, is he not ? or a wise one rather, for he knows thou wouldst not harm him," cried Angela, trying to speak with a recovered gaiety ; and dreading to meet again the troubled beauty of those eyes ; "he mistakes thy palm for a flower, or perhaps he likes thee, and has come to kiss thy hand."

But Paul did not hear her speak. Engrossed with his own fair dreams he was smiling and whispering to himself with low, inarticulate sounds, full of a curious harmony.

Angela recognised now the strange murmurs which had arrested her attention only a short time before in the meadow, and though she was growing impatient as the moments sped by, and she gazed towards the

pine-woods and again towards the chalet with anxiety, she seemed unwilling to break up the fancies which were evidently enthralling the child's mind and bringing to it temporary happiness and peace.

At last the butterfly, always uncertain in its movements, opened wide its trembling wings and prepared for flight. Once or twice it hesitated in its fickle homage, sinking and rising over Paul's hand lingeringly ; but presently it hesitated no longer, but rose with fluttering wings upon the evening air.

The child's eyes followed its upward course with a strange rapt gaze and parted lips. Up, up, up it struggled, ever nearer and nearer to the blue background of the sky which shone above the dark foliage of the tree.

"He will be tired," cried Angela ; "his wings are not strong enough for such a flight. See, see, how he mounts ; he is only a dark speck now against the blue!" Then, with a sudden change of tone, she added, "Ah, Paul, if thou and I could fly, we should mount higher still, should we not?"

Again that strange glance of wild, almost fearful joy.

"We *shall* do so some day ; that thou knowest is true," said Angela, softly ; "we shall mount up to a land where there is no more sorrow, no suffering, no fear."

Paul listened with an almost fearful interest to her words. That he understood her meaning was clear, though the fixed eyes gazed at her with the same steadfast unmodulated glance, and Angela's voice trembled.

"Thou wilt see *thy* mother there ; and I—I shall see *mine*."

A radiant smile shone over the child's face.

"Ah, thou understandest me; thou knowest of what land I speak," cried Angela; "thou wishest to be in heaven as I do. Thou knowest that Christ loves little children, and when they suffer He suffers too. Some day thou wilt be folded in His arms and rest thy poor sick head upon His breast; some day, perhaps not far distant, thou wilt go."

"À Dieu, à Dieu!" cried the child, with a cry of ecstasy; "à Dieu, à Dieu, à Dieu."

Angela's face blanched with terror, and she with difficulty repressed a scream. It was to her as if the sky had opened and a voice from heaven sounded in her ears. She did not know, poor girl! she had not heard, that the God who, in His all-wise Providence, had permitted this poor child to be so far estranged from earth and all things earthly, had given to his mute lips the one strange faculty of crying to Him alone for help, of pleading ever in his distress or bewilderment that to God he belonged, and looking ever upward in trouble or in joy to the King of that City within whose walls his feet already seemed to stray.

Angela gazed at Paul for a moment with a kind of superstitious awe. All the dark stories of Christine, which Pierre had so often whispered in her ear, came rushing over her mind and clouding it temporarily with distrust and fear, but the angelic face, the heavenly smile, the upward gaze of rapture, and, lastly, the cry to God which still echoed plaintively in the air; how could she stain her pure mind with such dark and hateful thoughts! Yes, poor child, to God he had cried, and to God he surely did belong; she would——

"Angela! Angela!" cried a deep voice from the neighbouring wood. "Where art thou?"

It was Pierre. Angela started up; the scarlet flower fell from her knees on the grass, while the colour faded as quickly from her face and lips. Her dreams of heaven and peace and love were shattered in a moment, and she snatched up the child with a low cry of terror.

"Angela! Where art thou hiding, Angela? Canst thou not answer me?" came the voice, lovingly, though in somewhat angry tones, across the evening air.

Yes, it was undoubtedly Pierre, for she could see the blue blouse, the tall, lithe figure, the yellow sabots, advancing indolently through the shadows and the ferns. Worst of all, she could see Wolf, the dog, walking by his side, and looking up anxiously and expectantly into his master's face.

"Down, Wolf!" he cried, lightly; "to heel. I shall find her for myself; I am certain she is hiding somewhere about here." How handsome he looked; how careless; how ignorant of the anguish of her heart! With his hands thrust into his pockets he laughed as he approached.

Angela once more crouched downwards towards the ground, seeking to conceal the child and herself behind the low mound of newly-cut grass beside her.

"Ha! ha! now I see thee," shouted Pierre; "is that the way thou makest hay, lolling lazily on the ground and playing with the children? It was Wolf guided me here, or I might have searched for thee for ever."

"Thou hast come too soon," she cried back with trembling lips and uncertain voice. "The hay here

is already made and the rest is only being mown. It were better for thee to go home and return to-morrow."

"Ha, ha!" laughed Pierre again, still in happy ignorance of her distress, "thou art really too polite. First thou lurest me all the way from the Pont d'Esprit, and then thou;—but, my heart! what is the matter with the girl? What is she doing now, flying from me as if I were a wild cat of the woods? Angela, I say, do not be so silly; I am too hot and lazy to run after thee; put down the little Catarina and come and sit under the trees."

But Angela in her sudden bewilderment vouchsafed him no reply. Too terrified to await the lad's nearer approach, she had snatched up the child in her arms and, turning towards the ch^âlet, was now straining with panting breath, and feet that fain would fly, across the meadow in the direction of the house. She was not destined, however, to reach this desired haven in safety, for as she doubled swiftly behind a mound of hay considerably higher than herself, she heard the voice of Marie Fedele calling to her loudly from the foot of the clover meadow close by the swift-flowing mill stream. "Angela, Angela," she cried, "where art thou racing so fast? Come down hither and assist me; one of the children has strayed from the house and I cannot find it; come quickly, I implore you, it may have fallen into the mill stream."

"No, no, it is all right, do not fear," she replied breathlessly; then, catching a glimpse of Marie's figure in the meadow, she turned a little towards her, so that she might discern the burden which lay so helplessly and heavy in her arms, and paused hesitatingly.

Marie with quick sight and keen perception

evidently took in at once the danger and difficulty of the moment, for she threw up her arms with a gesture of fear, and then, making furtive signs to Angela to hasten towards her, she ran quickly forwards to meet them.

As yet there was no sound of pursuit, and as Angela stumbled blindly down through the sweet scented clover, she could hear Pierre laughing and whistling in the distance.

But laughter was far from her heart ; her strength was well nigh spent. One glance at the face of the child which she carried in her arms had filled her with a speechless dread. She could no longer call or cry for help, only stagger helplessly forward with her burden, and Marie's advancing figure seemed only a blur on the outline of the field.

"Angela!" cried Pierre, with a loud laugh of surprise, which came ringing across the intervening ground, "what art thou flying from me for? do come back to me. If I chose to run, I should catch thee up in half a minute, but it is too hot for such gambols; leave the child with its mother and come back, I am waiting for thy promised lesson."

"Yes, yes," she replied in a voice which scarce issued in a whisper from her dry and parched lips, "I am coming; patience, patience! have patience!"

This whispered appeal for patience Pierre did not hear; no human ear could have heard it; but the afternoon had been scorching hot, and the sun blazing down on his head had made it throb, and his back ache, so Pierre was not inclined for a foolish chase across a somewhat stubbly meadow. He would wait, he thought, and allow the truant to return, which she

was pretty sure to do when she had deposited Marie's child with its mother.

Could Angela have read his thoughts and known the lazy mood of the lad, and his determination to wait quietly for her re-appearance, things might have gone better than they did; but, paralysed with fear, and conscious of a rapidly decreasing strength, it needed little to upset the nervous balance of her mind, and one glimpse of a black cloaked figure, which issued with furtive steps and frantic gestures from behind the shadow of the mill shed close at hand, beckoning to her eagerly to advance, deprived her of all further self-restraint, and there issued through her lips a cry of such unfeigned and agonising fear that none who heard it could have hesitated for a moment to rush to her assistance.

Pierre leaped to his feet and, whistling to his dog, made swiftly in the direction of the cry. A sudden fear had come over him that the great cream-coloured bull, which generally pastured behind the wood, had burst from its tether and was now in pursuit of Angela, who, burdened as she was with the child, and whom from its white dress and fair hair, he imagined to be Marie's little girl, Catarina, had small chance of escape in flight.

Leaping the intervening saw-pit and the pine logs which lay heaped around it on the edge of the wood, Pierre took the most direct course towards the clover meadow, calling in loud, reassuring tones to Angela that he was coming quickly to her aid and would soon be with her. A row of low goat-sheds with their projecting eaves, and a string of wooden charettes filled with the newly-made hay from the field, for a time intercepted Pierre's sight; but tall, and swift of foot,

he left them quickly behind him, and emerged with anxious, searching eyes upon the more open clover meadow.

There, leaning against the trunk of a mulberry-tree, which stood some little distance higher up the field, he saw Angela ; her hat had fallen from her head, and her arms, no longer encumbered with the child, hung helplessly by her side, but the moment she caught sight of Pierre she uttered again the same piercing cry of fear, and covered her eyes hastily with her hand.

"Go back, go back!" she cried, frantically and imperatively, "wicked that thou art! how canst thou be so wicked and so cruel?"

Pierre heard the words, and, for a minute appalled, he halted in his onward course, while a darkness came over his handsome face which was terrible to see. It was Angela's voice and Angela's lips which had uttered those insulting, ill-deserved reproaches; it was clearly now at sight of him that she had fled so precipitately, and uttered such piercing cries of terror. What had he done to incur such sudden and unlooked-for anger? or what was there about him this afternoon to raise such fear in her breast? Perhaps some strange hallucination had been cast over Angela's mind, and she fancied she saw in him some evil or ravenous beast coming to destroy her. Pierre paused, while a new and startling suggestion passed through his mind, and with a rapid and breathless haste he searched within the breast of his jerkin for the subtle charm given him by Janette Chaudron. For a second or so it eluded his search, and rage and disappointment flamed passionately in his breast. The precious amulet, however, was not lost; his trembling

fingers had momentarily passed over it in their eagerness, and now with an air of triumph he looked up.

But the space beneath the mulberry-tree was now vacant, and Angela's light figure could be seen rapidly ascending the grassy hill towards the chalet.

"Now, I protest, this is too much to bear. Am I a dog that she treats me so? A couple of hours ago, on the bridge, she almost fawned on me with honeyed words and smiles. With her own lips she invited me here, and now, see how she flies from me! Ah, but I will make her give an account of this to me!"

"Angela! have done with this folly," he cried, in loud, angry tones.

But the youthful figure never paused or hesitated for an instant at his call, and no reply came to his reiterated appeals.

Pierre stamped with his heel upon the ground, and some wish, too dark for absolute utterance, hissed unpleasantly through his closed teeth. He drew a deep breath, and seemed to search the very corners of his mind for some reason for this strange and cruel conduct to him.

In the pause which followed, above the distant rush of the mill-stream, above the low cooing of the wood-pigeons, and the dim murmur of myriads of gauzy wings; above, too, the angry beating of his own heart there came a sound, a sound faint as the moan of some poor dying creature:

"À Dieu, à Dieu, à Dieu!"

It seemed to hover in the air, this cry, so sad, so wild, so full of a terrible sorrow; this appeal to One who sits so high above the heavens. Pierre heard it as he stood, white with passion, on the brow of the

clover field, and it needed but this sound to strike the full chord of a breathless fury in his breast. The words falling like sparks of fire into scorched and parching grass, his whole being was instantly aflame, and anger, quenchless hate, and a devouring thirst for revenge filled every fibre of his frame. With a yell of defiance that seemed to paralyse Angela, and turn her figure to stone on the hill side, he made for the chalet, through whose doors he had seen a woman swiftly disappear, a woman with a child in her arms, whom in that one instant of suddenly aroused suspicion he had recognised as the object of all his hatred and deadliest vows of vengeance, Christine !

The ridge of the clover meadow which Pierre had to climb was steep, and his heart beat passionately in his bosom, for on the grassy ledge stood Angela, white as marble, with wide-straining eyes of terror, awaiting his approach. It was terrible to see anything so young and fair in such an anguish of mental fear, and yet the idle wind, playing among the sweet pink clover heads could as little stop or turn him from his onward course as she who had interfered between him and his prey.

He only moved a foot or so aside, that he might not brush rudely against her in her weakness, and perhaps fling her to the earth in his onward course.

"Pierre, Pierre! stop, stop, only one moment, if thou lovest me!" She lifted up her hands in supplication, and the dry, fear-choked effort for speech even then smote painfully on his ear.

"Out of my way!" he cried, with increasing anger, "ten thousand demons shall not stop me now. Out of my way, deceitful girl that you are!"

She gave a quick sharp cry of pain and turned

instantly aside from his path ; and then, as if in fear of further insult, she fled before him towards the chalet.

But Angela's flight was not for long. The slight impediment of a wooden water-course which lay across her path, and which led from the chalet to the river, brought her to a sudden stand-still. She had no strength left to leap over it, so she caught at a sapling on the outskirts of the orchard for support.

Pierre was close upon her heels, and in another moment he would pass her in his impetuous flight. No bars or bolts in the chalet yonder would stop the ingress of such a resolved and desperate spirit, and no woman's tears or supplications might interfere to save those appointed to die.

She saw it all, even in the faintness and blindness of her fear. There were a dozen entries to the chalet, through doors, windows, and galleries. Pierre knew them all, and there was no escape from such a whirlwind of passion.

"Out of my way, vile woman!" Pierre chose no nice terms in his passion ; "out of my way, or I will thrust thee from it!"

But Angela did not hear his threat, or the rough words which accompanied it. Another cry, pitiful though distant, had reached her ears and heart, and at it she loosened her clasp of the apple-tree and stood up in his way, determined, at all hazards, to delay or withstand his progress.

"Pierre, Pierre!" she cried in anguish as she stretched out her arms wide across the path ; "Pierre, listen to me, only for one moment ; thou must listen. Nay, I cannot give place ; thou must let me speak!"

He caught her hand roughly in his rage and tried

to throw her from him, but though she staggered a step backwards in the long grass, and once more caught at the apple-stem for support, she recovered herself quickly.

Pierre's face was dreadful to look at. To be thwarted thus by a girl who had deceived and outwitted him, and who now was making herself the tool and champion of his enemies, was unendurable; and hate, that bitterest hate which has its root in love, filled his heart with a rage which was scarcely human. He closed his eyes that he might not see the girlish form which would perforce withstand him, and flung out blindly with his arms, not with a nicely-balanced zeal, but with a merciless strength, and though for one moment it seemed as if soft arms had touched his neck, and a woman's head had been pressed lightly against his breast, that moment, even if it had ever existed, was passed and gone, and only a suppressed cry of pain, and a fleeting vision of a woman's figure moving proudly from his path, gave colour to such a strange and irreconcilable thought.

Pierre intended to strike, and what he wished to do he had done, and he was free to continue his chase. Why should he care? he had pushed her, no doubt, somewhat roughly aside, but had he not warned her again and again to keep clear of his course? She must take the consequences of her ill-timed interference; it was no fault of his. But even as he strode on with firm intent to pursue his victim to the end, a moan from beside the apple-tree smote upon his ear, and passing like the sharp edge of a knife through his heart, it arrested his revengeful fury, letting in instead a flood of passionate self-reproach and fear. He turned while still he ran, the impetus

of the chase bearing him momentarily forward. He caught a glimpse of a fair head pressed against the cool grey branches of the tree, of a hand clenched as if in mortal pain, and of a face pallid as death, with white lips and fixed eyes ; but ere he could utter one word of sorrow or dismay, or question the nature of Angela's injury, fate arrested his steps also, and with a far more sudden and desperate check.

The wooden watercourse, which a moment before had brought poor Angela to an untimely halt, had lain across his path, too ; and as he turned to look at the woman he had so cruelly struck, he stumbled violently over its rough framework, and his ankle catching in its rusty trestles, he fell, with a groan, forward on his face, not rising again with the usual rebound of careless youth, but lying silent and senseless, with his foot still tightly locked between the rough bars of the wooden conduit.



"HE STUMBLED VIOLENTLY OVER ITS ROUGH FRAMEWORK" (p. 88).

CHAPTER VII.

WAS IT A VISION?

THUS it was Pierre's fate to be foiled again in the one supreme desire of his life; once again Christine and her "cub," as Pierre disdainfully designated poor little Paul, had escaped him. At a moment, too, when their capture was as certain and easy to be accomplished as the catching of silly sheep for slaughter. It was all Angela's fault; she had snatched this easy victory from his hand, and he had not forgiven her for it yet, though months had come and gone since that memorable afternoon on the hill-side; the sweet hay had then scented all the air and bright flowers clothed the pastures; now, snow and ice bound the earth and held it fast with its grasp of iron.

Poor, pretty Angela! Pierre found it a hard task to harden his heart against her. Her pale, pure face, to which the lovely carmine tint had never returned since the day of her terror-stricken flight, was a perpetual reproach to him. She had never reproached him; on the contrary, she met him always with the same frank expression of good will, or grave, anxious eyes which sought, on dark and stormy days of passion and disappointment, to search the recesses of his mind, and often a quiet word full of gracious pity and purest womanly love fell upon his tempest-tossed, doubting, miserable heart, and lay there like the unnoticed, untreasured seed of some pure fair flower, to spring up by-and-by, in the sirocco heat of a wild

despair, and to bring coolest shade, sweetest remembrance, and, at the last, peace and rest to its tired and yearning spirit.

For weeks after his fall in the Fedeles' clover-field Pierre had lain on a couch, helpless and suffering. His foot had received a wrench which at first threatened to maim him for life. The first agony of pain had been so great that he had passed from one swoon into another, and it was with difficulty they had carried him within the *châlet* close at hand and laid him on Antoine's bed, where the first few weeks of his unlooked-for captivity were spent, and where all that love and tenderness could do to soothe his pain and lighten his enforced imprisonment, were done and carried out with ready zeal and generous hands.

Pauline Milano, too, Pierre's mother, was received as an honoured and welcome guest in the Fedeles' house (she and Marie Fedele had ever been fast friends, and now they drew still closer together in this time of trial and anxiety), when, for a time, the fever ran so high and the pain was so excruciating that they feared for Pierre's life, and the village doctor looked scared and doubtful.

For some long and anxious nights Marie and Pauline watched by Pierre's bedside, bathing the poor wounded foot with coldest water from the spring whose wooden channel had been the cause of his accident; and many a sigh came from those women's hearts as they listened to the wild words and threats and outbursts of sudden raving passion which fell from Pierre's lips in the heat and forgetfulness of fever.

Through the long night a vision of Christine in her dark cloak, with a quaintly-shaped hood, seemed

to stand like a nightmare at the foot of Pierre's bed. He addressed it with fierce words and poured upon it passionate reproaches for his father's death and his mother's widowed life. He struck at the air blindly and struggled with a desperate effort to rise up and do battle with his foe, till agony of body conquered the fevered fury of his mind and left him weak and senseless on his bed.

Often he addressed himself to Janette Chaudron, reproaching her bitterly for failure, and insisting that the charm for which she had taken his mother's gold was useless and that she herself was false, and an impostor trading on his feelings. Oftentimes he grasped at the charm itself, which now, during his fever, lay exposed and bare upon his breast, and muttered feverishly sentences of hidden and unholy meaning. Pauline and Marie shuddered to hear the words this wicked woman had taught him, and, had Pauline dared to do so, she would have severed the ribbon which bound the amulet to his neck, and which to her eyes seemed at most but a piece of shrivelled skin made into the shape of a small oval bag, and into the contents of which she durst not pry.

But in the day-time other faces and forms seemed to haunt his pillow. Often he covered up his face and wept. Sometimes he gazed with long, earnest eyes into the shadows of the room, and once, but once only, in the evening when his strength had run to the lowest and the sun was setting in red and sombre majesty behind the pines, when a general feeling of approaching trouble had fallen on all their hearts, he murmured in a voice, weak, but full of a strange excitement, "Angela, hearken to me; come

hither to me, bend down your head." He drew the shadowy air close, closer to him with his outstretched arm, then in a whisper which fell with curious distinctness on all their ears, he said, pitifully, "Angela, Angela, if thou still canst love me, teach me to know God."

His mother heard it with a start of hope and a pang of pain, Marie turned her face to the wall and wept, and Antoine gazed from the window steadfastly till the red outline of the dying sun grew big as an outstretched banner, on the crimson of whose draperies he seemed to read the words just spoken in his ears: "Teach me to know God."

But these were the phantasies of fever. After a time Pierre grew strong, strong enough to control his thoughts and feelings, and the rough husk of boyish pride closed again over the soft core of the inner heart, and all the vague longings, the unspoken aspirations, the strivings of the spirit were hidden from sight, and none dared probe ever so delicately to bring them again to view.

His mother read to him histories of holy men and their martyrdoms. Morning and evening also she prayed by his bedside. The whispered appeal to Angela had wounded her loving heart to the quick, and she sought about how she could bring comfort to his soul; but though he stroked her hair affectionately as she knelt beside him, and often pillowed his head against her faithful breast, she drew forth no responsive word, no further cry for help, or wish for comfort.

Once or twice she spoke to him of his father and of her own lonely life, but this she soon found was dangerous ground to tread on. Pierre's eyes burned

with a restless fire, his hand grew hot, and he questioned angrily how long this enforced rest must continue, and when he would be permitted to go forth and face the world afresh.

Antoine Fedele, Marie's stepson, was the companion who suited Pierre's moods the best; his weak and somewhat easy-going disposition made him ready to listen to both good and evil. He never interrupted the fierce outburst of passion or questioned the justice of Pierre's hatred and determination for vengeance. With an artist's eye, for Antoine was a true artist in spirit, he watched the deep flush of colour in the handsome face, the rising fire which seemed to burn and blaze behind the eye of the speaker like tongues of flame leaping from the purple heather on the mountain. He noticed the muscles which rose on the hand contracted with passion, and the false lines of scornful laughter which sometimes played about Pierre's mouth; and when this mood was over, when the thunder-cloud had burst and the tempest had exhausted its fury, he knew how to bring his rough canvas and crayons to the bedside and sketch fair young faces and graceful country scenes, and above all, one face, a girl's face, pure and innocent and earnest, with eyes gazing upwards and a yearning, far-off look of entreaty.

"Why do you always give that look to her face?" asked Pierre, curiously, one evening, as Antoine's pencil wandered over the paper. "Why do you not make her smile sometimes, or look at one? it makes her too much of a saint and too little of a woman."

"I cannot help it," replied Antoine, laughing. "Angela *is* a saint; when I make her look down I lose the likeness."

Once, in the dull twilight of a November evening, when Pierre was beginning to limp about again with the aid of a crutch, and all was grey and dim within the little raftered chamber, Pierre put the languid question to his companion, "Antoine, tell me, lad, what picture has usually hung on the wall just at the foot of my bed? There is a square patch or mark on the wood which always puzzled me all through this illness, and especially through the fever."

"A picture?" responded Antoine doubtfully; but he reddened as he spoke.

"Yes, for I have a most curious and dreamy recollection of the day I was carried in here, seeing your mother (your stepmother, I mean) standing on a chair at the foot of the bed, and hurriedly lifting down some object from the wall, which, from the mark it has left upon it yonder, must, I feel sure, have been a picture of some kind."

"I daresay," replied Antoine, in an absent, uninterested tone of voice, though now, as Pierre gazed at him, he turned his face quickly to the chalet window, and looked out into the darkening pine wood.

"You do not know, then, what it was?" asked Pierre.

"Mother is always twisting and turning the things in the house," replied Antoine, in the same strangely uninterested voice; but Pierre evidently caught something in its tone which made him ponder.

"Sometimes," he continued, with growing energy, "I fancied it was a window, that light square you see over there on the wall. Why do you not look at me, Antoine? What can you see outside, that your face is pasted against the casement?"

"Nothing; only you torment one about trifles.

What do I care what was on the wall? not a straw!" and Antoine jerked his head impatiently.

"But I do, for you cannot think how it teased me in my illness. I was always expecting some horrible face to look in at me through this imaginary window, and sometimes I fancied I did see faces staring at me, horrible faces, with eyes that looked me through and through, faces that seemed to grow and grow until they filled the whole room. Sometimes it was that vile witch, Christine, who glared at me, and when I would have risen to slay her, I fancied they had chained me to my bed, so that I could not move hand or foot. Sometimes it was Janette Chaudron, sometimes it was Angela, poor Angela! so deadly pale, death-stricken she seemed to me, and she gazed at me so earnestly, so sadly, it was a pain that cut my heart, and once, just in the gloaming, like this, I looked up suddenly, and I saw" (Pierre's voice sank almost to a whisper), "I saw in the yellow square of the panel what seemed to me the face of an angel. I do not believe in angels," said Pierre, in a strange, hard tone, "but, but, either this was a vision, or some wild trick of memory. It was a child's face;" here his voice sank back again to an awed whisper: "the hair was golden, the eyes were large and full of light, they gazed straight into mine with a look which, weak as I was, brought the very tears to my lids. The figure was clothed in some shining dress of purest white, and it seemed to poise and hover in the air on wings of gold. I was wondering to myself if it could be the face of my little brother, who died so many years ago, for there was something curiously familiar in the expression, when all at once it faded from my sight, and the panel grew dim and dark, as

it is now, but still as I watched and listened I fancied I heard it calling to me from the distance, and bidding me good-bye. 'Farewell, farewell!' it cried, sadly, and then I fell to wondering, wondering, and thinking, and plodding over the same old theme. "Antoine," cried Pierre, earnestly, as he leaned forward in the large, easy invalid chair, and looked anxiously into his friend's half-averted face, "Antoine, answer me truthfully this one question; do not hesitate, or shuffle, or seek to escape from the point; do you, do you, Antoine——"

"Do I what?" cried Antoine nervously, as he opened a creak of the casement and let in a breath of the fresh, cool air.

"Do you believe there is a God?"

"I—I—what a question to ask of me? Of course I do."

"You believe it in your very heart, Antoine?" Pierre leaned forward and fixed his burning eyes on his companion's face.

"If I do not believe it in my heart I know at whose door I should lay the want of faith," cried Antoine with blazing cheeks and fierce anger.

"At whose? at mine?"

"Why, yes, at yours; who else? Have you ever ceased, morning, noon, and night trying to unsettle all my hopes and to destroy all my peace? I am like a ball tossed to and fro from heaven to earth: first my mother weeps over me and prays, and when I see her tears I hate myself and all my wicked ways, while you—I need not tell you how you think and speak of her. Then Angela talks to me of heaven and lifts her eyes to the blue sky till I almost see the angels flying to and fro, and I am happy for a space until—

until"—Antoine hesitated, alarmed or amazed at the intense emotion visible on Pierre's face and movements.

"Until what?" he sighed hoarsely.

"Until *you* appear, and with your cold sneer or bitter jest you dash me back to earth again, and now, just Heaven! thou comest to me with thy questions, Do I believe in God? I tell you this much, Pierre, I would rather lift my eyes to heaven for help, far off as it seems to thee and unattainable, than lick the dust off Janette Chaudron's sabots, or grovel in her filthy hut as thou dost, listening to her wicked suggestions and bartering away thy soul for what can never bring thee aught but misery." Antoine paused for breath.

"And this is thy only answer to my question?" said Pierre, in a voice whose coldness suited ill with the feverish anxiety of his eyes.

"I, at least, have no other answer to suit thee," replied Antoine, rising and moving towards the door. "Thou canst not blame the tree whose trunk thou hast sawn through if it does not stand erect with its crest pointing towards heaven; but there are others, no doubt, who can reply with more confidence than I. Ask Angela Biondina; *she* believes," and Antoine, pushing past the chair in which Pierre was seated, left the room with a heart swelling with indignation, not untinged with amazement.

"Antoine," cried Pierre excitedly, "come back, I will tease thee no further with questions. Come back, the room is lonely and I am tired to death;" but his friend vouchsafed no reply, the door closed behind him with a snap, and the sound of his footsteps could be heard retreating swiftly down the chalet stairs.

For some time after his departure Pierre sat gazing vacantly before him at the seat which his friend had just occupied, and evidently lost in thought, and that of no pleasant or soothing kind ; but presently he awoke from his reverie and, passing his hand through his hair with a weary gesture, said, in a low desponding voice : " It is all true. My mother fears me ; Marie looks on me with suspicion, and Angela gazes at me with a pity more galling than the blackest words of censure. But how can I blame her ? for with her all is light, with me all is darkness." Pierre rose and leaned against the window-frame, gazing out with filling, wondering eyes upon the wintry landscape till they rested at length on the snow-peak opposite, whose summit, shining rosy pink amidst the surrounding gloom, stood up in softest majesty before him.

" It is just for all the world like Angela," sighed Pierre, looking sadly at the fading glory, " so loving, so pure, so near heaven. One sees the blush, the smile, the flickering light of hope or joy ; and one stretches out one's arms longingly, but like the mountains, she is miles away. She is ever there to comfort, to console, to brighten everything around her by her beauty and her purity ; but she is already half in heaven. Yet once she——!" A deep and sudden flush burned in Pierre's cheeks. He was weak from illness and could not easily control his feelings, and at the remembrance of the evening when he had thrust Angela from him with a roughness which was unmanly and even cowardly, a fiery shaft of pain seemed to pierce him to the soul, and he rose with a precipitancy beyond his strength and paced the chamber to and fro with a restless energy.

"Brute that I am!" he muttered feverishly, "no other woman but Angela would have forgiven me. But how brave she was, how resolved at all hazards to stop me!" Here Pierre paused near the window, his attention being arrested by the appearance outside in the garden of a rabbit, milk-white, with eyes glowing red in the twilight, which had daringly left the wood and approached the chalet and was now, after sundry gambols, sitting on its haunches right opposite the window, gazing about it with an innocent freedom from fear.

Pierre, whose superstition amounted almost to a mania, immediately drew some significance from its strange appearance. A milk-white rabbit was rare in those parts, and the showing itself thus, alone and at the dread hour when light and darkness meet, and all things grow unreal, was full of some secret import, a warning, perhaps, of approaching trouble or peril close at hand.

Janette Chaudron had given him a volume full of wise hints and rules for the elucidation of mysteries. Where was it? In its pages he would find the true significance. Antoine had at his request brought this book to him the other day from his own house. It must be somewhere close at hand. Pierre turned and searched the room, at first with cautious assurance, then with a diligent zeal. "I must, I will find it," he said peevishly. "This is an omen not to be neglected. Here, let me search in this cupboard; no doubt my mother has hidden it away as unfit for both eyes and ears. She is right in some respects, I must confess——"

Pierre paused; he had opened the rough wooden door of the press as he spoke, and now he stood before

it, motionless, almost breathless, the very words he had uttered still hanging on his parted lips.

The book he had sought for *was* there, lying on a shelf in the very front of the deep, dark cupboard. Its pages were open at a picture upon which even Pierre's eyes would not have lingered, but far back in the sombre shadow another picture was revealed to his earnest gaze.

"The same face," he murmured with a choked, dry effort at speech, "the same eyes; my God! how they search one's heart! Who is it? what is it? Let me have light. It was no dream, then, but the truth!" Pierre flung back the cupboard door so as to catch the last dull light of the evening sun, revealing as he did so the tarnished gilding of a frame home-made and coarse, and the face and figure of a child clad in a loose white garment, with a golden background, a sunset glory, and soft verdant foliage.

Pierre put in his hand, and drew the picture nearer to his haggard face and burning eyes; then he thrust it from him with a cry, sharp, anguished, yet defiant.

"It is Paul the fool; Christine's hateful cub. This, then, is why they hid it from my sight. They feared I should otherwise have risen some night in my fever and torn it from its frame. I will do it yet; I will do worse, for I will teach my heart to know no mercy, no pity. But, good God! what is that cry outside in the garden? Why, the fall of a leaf now makes me tremble." Pierre closed the press door quickly, and moved as if in a dream to the window, only to turn from it again with a movement of quick disgust.

For outside, on the sward, which a moment ago had been the scene of its innocent gambols, the white rabbit now lay quivering in its death throes.

A hawk, fell and cruel in its purpose, with its talons firmly fixed in its victim's palpitating sides, was even now striking with its curved beak and deadly aim on the poor animal's bruised and stricken head, and its white and glossy skin was all flecked and stained with drops of blood.

Pierre cried out in a sudden frenzy, and beat against the casement, loudly calling for Antoine, or some one to rush out and stay the cruel deed. Alas ! it was all in vain. The hawk, it is true, scared by the noise within, took flight, rising up with gory beak and shrill cry into the still evening air, but its victim lay motionless and dead, a small white fleck stretched in a sorrowful calm on the dark and sombre grass beneath !

Then Pierre, turning away, saw, as it were "in a glass darkly," a vision—a vision of himself and his unholy purposes ; a vision faint, but fearful. He turned with a sick shudder from its contemplation, and sinking with a groan into the nearest chair, covered his face with his hands.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE RETURN HOME.

THE next day Pierre left Marie Fedele's house, and returned home. He could no longer find rest or peace of mind in the room which held, concealed from his view, but still close at hand, the picture of little Paul. All through his troubled sleep he had seemed to see those earnest, innocent eyes, so full of a settled pain, fixed on him, while in his ears had sounded again and again the death cry of the white rabbit and the shrill scream of the hawk. The terrors of darkness made him their prey, and morning light, fair and beautiful, brought him no peace. He could not rest in bed, and yet he feared to rise and see that white and lifeless thing lying so still upon the grass, or to draw nearer to that door, behind whose panels those eyes were gazing at him with their endless, unsearchable sorrow.

When his mother entered his room with an early cup of refreshing coffee, he sat up with flushed cheeks and a feverish excitement of manner.

"Mother!"

"Well, my son?"

"We will go home to-day. I am tired to death of this house and life. I can find neither rest nor peace beneath this detested roof!"

"Pierre! is it possible? How canst thou speak so? Have not Marie and her husband done all that was possible to make thee comfortable?"

"Yes, yes! it is all true, and I am an ingrate. I

see the word written in thy eyes, though thou hesitatest to speak it. They have done all they can, good folk, to make me comfortable, but to make me happy is another affair."

"What is it makes thee so unhappy?"

"Mother! canst *thou* ask the question?" Pierre turned his eyes, full of an almost scornful reproach, on his mother, but their expression softened and changed as they rested on her sad and now quivering features; on the tears which had started with a quick response to her eyelids. "If I am not happy it is heaven's fault, not thine!" he added bitterly.

"Thou hast never sought for happiness from heaven, Pierre."

"Let me ask thee this question," he replied, moodily. "How many years hast thou beaten at its gates, mother? and, when it has yielded at length to thy supplications, what streams of sorrow has it not poured forth on thy devoted head? but thou hast the spirit of the beaten dog, who, the more it is chastised the more it licks the hand that strikes it; while for me it is different; the hand that strikes me shall always give an account of the why and the wherefore. But let us make an end for ever of this subject; it hurts thee, and it drives me mad. Let me rise and dress myself."

"But why not content thyself a while longer in this house? To move thee now might bring back a return of the fever," said Pauline, sorrowfully.

"I care not for that, so long as I leave this place. I long once more to feel myself a free man, and be at liberty to speak and act as I like. Why, only yesterday," cried Pierre, angrily, "I was denied the pleasure of having my own dog brought in to see me. I asked

Antoine to fetch it here, if only for an hour, and Marie refused her permission in so decided a tone that even Antoine shuffled in his shoes, and looked as if his own ears had been boxed. If it had been any one else but Marie I could have had my say also ; but Marie is privileged to do just as she likes, though all that drops from her lips is by no means honey."

Pauline Milano did not answer ; she only stretched out the folds of her dress, and sighed heavily.

Pierre seemed, however, to expect an answer, and when, after some seconds, none came, he asked again,

"Why, mother, may I not have Wolf here?"

"Perhaps Marie fears it may frighten the children."

"Frighten the children ! What children?"

"The children about the place."

"Dost thou mean the little Catarina, or the baby ? Why, mother, that is folly ! How often has Catarina ridden on Wolf's back ? and as to the baby, why, it screams with joy, not fear, when it sees him bounding down the road. No ; there is some other cause, and if it were from nothing but thy own manner at this moment, I should know it. In any case we will make an end of it all, and return to our own home to-day. I am sick of the mysteries perpetually going on in this house. Every one speaks under their breath, or gazes at you with half-averted eyes. Let us go where we can breathe freely and manage our own affairs as we choose."

"But, my son, dost thou not see that snow has fallen heavily during the night, and now there is a sharp frost ? To rise and face such a keen air when thou hast been so long in bed would be dangerous in the extreme. Be satisfied to remain here quietly until the snow has disappeared, and then we

can move, if thou desirest it. Also it would be hurtful to Marie's feelings to make so hurried a departure without just cause or excuse."

"Marie will bless the day and hour I leave this house," replied Pierre, coldly.

"Pierre, Pierre! it is too bad of thee! How canst thou say such things? and of Marie, too, who took thee in in thy distress, and gave thee a welcome, and the tenderest care!"

"As she would any poor cat who had fallen from her roof and broken its leg. Marie could not shut her door against the vilest wretch or the meanest beast that crawls, if only it needed comfort and consolation, or cried for help to her. But, bah! that is the nature of the woman! Within that soft, peach-like coating there is a heart whose kernel is as hard as a stone, and a courage to defy to the uttermost those who would oppose her. Thou needest not to smile so incredulously, mother; Marie has one side of her tongue for those she loves, but the other can sting like a wasp. She has made me feel it once or twice, and one does not forget it in a hurry."

"Thou hast no doubt given her cause."

"Of course, of course!" replied Pierre, with an affected carelessness, "women do not take much to rouse their anger or dislike;" then with an unconcealed bitterness and passion he broke forth, "I am without doubt the vilest of the vile, the greatest ingrate that ever breathed, the plague-spot of the village, all that is bad, and low, and sinful. I hear it; aye, and I see it too in every one's eye, even when the tongue speaks a contrary opinion, but from thee, mother, who brought me into this hateful world, I might look for some sympathy, some support. When every hand is against

me I might turn to thee for protection, secure of the shelter of thy love. It was so once. Aye, once I had no need to search or crave for love ; it was everywhere. My good father——” here Pierre’s face became almost distorted with the pain which he struggled to subdue. “ My good father had love and tenderness enough in his one heart to swamp all the malice and hatred of this whole town. When he lived the sun shone all day, aye, and all night. One had not to read his eyes of a morning to know what clouds were hovering on the horizon. One drank of that love and was satisfied, without one dark misgiving, one unworthy doubt, and, now he lies in his grave, and we live on, you and I, and——and, every day——” here choking sobs interrupted Pierre’s speech for a time. “ Every day, as the divided arms of a once great river, spread out and forsaking each other, branch off into distant lands, so we are drifting from each other, thou from me, and I from thee, until at last we shall know each other no more, and it will be as though we had never loved ! Mother, answer me.”

But Pauline made no response ; her head, now silvered over with the snows of sorrow, was bent low down upon her knees, and only a faint moan of the deepest anguish showed how the shaft of her son’s reproach had sunk into her heart.

It was all true ; their lives were branching apart. Each day the bond of a once strong love was loosening, and soon she might stretch out her arms for him in vain, and then, what would the world hold for her ?

“ Mother, hast thou no word for me ?”

Pauline stretched out her hand, but her tongue felt dried up, and she could make no answer.

“ Let us go home, mother, we shall do better there.

Where there are none but thee and me we must perforce find some comfort in each other's company. Let us go round by my father's grave, and sit there awhile. There, at least, our thoughts ought to be in unison ; and, thinking of his love, we shall perhaps return to a new and a less divided life."

Thus it came to pass that despite the snow and the frost Pierre left Marie Fedele's house that day and went back to his own home.

Leaning on his mother's arm, he plodded wearily forward, with his head sunk upon his chest and scarcely noticing the friendly salutations of the passers-by, who congratulated him or his mother on his sudden reappearance amongst them. There was an iron band round his heart this morning, and he must weep it out somewhere secretly before he could look his fellow villagers in the face, or reply to their kindly greetings.

He had said "good bye" to Marie with a swelling heart, and thanked her for all her goodness and kindness to him. She stood before him gravely with her infant in her arms, beautiful as a Madonna. She answered him with a low voice and hesitating manner, not pressing him to remain, even for a day longer, till his own house was set in order, but speaking hopefully of his speedy recovery, and trusting that now that he was well enough to get about a little again, he would insist on making his mother take some rest, as she surely needed it after her long and anxious nurse-tending.

A red fire shone behind Pierre's eyes as Marie spoke of his mother. It hurt his pride that any one, much less Marie, should advise him as to his filial duties. So his parting words of gratitude fell from his lips with no true and heart-felt ring in their sound, but

Marie seemed to look for no thanks ; her mind was evidently pre-occupied with other and graver thoughts. She did not even notice that the snow was falling heavily as they went out through the chalet door, but turned quickly back into the house, and Pierre, as he limped past the angle of the garden wall, heard her exclaim feverishly, " Now, Antoine, quick, fetch me the basket, I am in haste to start," and the voice of her husband from an inner room exclaiming, " Nonsense, Marie, I will not hear of thy going forth in this snow and frost ; why, on the hill-side it must be three feet deep, and thou wouldst risk thy limbs, to say nothing of thy life."

Pierre could not hear Marie's reply, but the words he had heard gave him food for reflection, and he walked on in an almost unbroken silence by his mother's side till he reached the gate of the little village churchyard. His mother laid her fingers on the latch and sighed heavily as she pushed it open, but Pierre, with a sudden heat at his heart, exclaimed quickly, " No, mother, not to-day, let us turn back, I pray thee ; I thought it would rest thy mind and body to see his quiet home, and lie awhile beside it, thinking of him and talking of him with me, but now, to me at least, it is impossible ; the sight of it would only set me wild, and the thought of his cruel death drive me almost to madness."

So they turned back, and, plodding through the snow, reached their own house with heavy hearts and weary bodies.

But at the gate Pierre's face lit up with a sudden irrepressible smile, and a ruddy glow covered his pale cheeks with almost a painful crimson. There, waiting to welcome them, stood Angela, radiant in the

doorway, her own face a trifle white, perhaps, but brimming over with the sunshine of an inward peace, and the desire to shed this peace upon the hearts and lives of those whom now she waited for.

"Welcome, a thousand times welcome!" she cried, joyfully, as, regardless of the snow, she hastened with outstretched arms down the garden path to meet them. "I heard you were returning home somewhat unexpectedly, and ran forward to have all in readiness for you." She placed a hand in each of theirs and looked up into their faces as she spoke.

"But, Pauline, how tired thou lookest! Here, Pierre shall lean on me. It is only a step to the door, and though I am small I shall make a good crutch. Come, do not fear, thou mayest lean as heavily as thou wilt. Many a day my father has trusted all his weight to my arm when his poor feet have been cramped with rheumatism."

Pierre took the proffered arm and moved slowly towards the house. He would willingly, tired as he was, have extended the path a mile further, for it seemed to him as if at sight of Angela a great and mellow sunshine had burst over everything; his head, his feet, his home, his heart, all were bathed in the light of her countenance, and all evil and moody thoughts seemed to shrink away into nothingness in her pure and gentle presence.

Wolf, too, his dog, came bounding up from the back garden, and was almost overpoweringly demonstrative in his affection. It was well he had so true an arm to steady himself upon, otherwise Wolf's rough advances would have been difficult to contend with. Within the kitchen the fire was lighting, and the copper kettle was singing in the corner.

Angela, having placed Pierre in an easy chair close by the hearth, busied herself now in looking after Pauline, who, with a heart still smarting from the words addressed to her by Pierre in the morning, looked *distracte* and down-hearted; and though gratified by Angela's affectionate greeting, and by her zealous loving ways, she could not all at once shake off the dejection which oppressed her.

"And how didst thou know that we contemplated so speedy a return home? We had no thought of it ourselves until this morning," she asked, curiously, as she seated herself opposite Pierre in a chair placed for her by Angela.

"I heard of it from Antoine. He passed by the inn early this morning to have a horse rough-shod at the forge, as the frost was so hard and the road slippery, and he told me that you had it in your minds to move, as Pierre was wearying for home, and so walking to the gate I met Marie and she confirmed it. We wondered much how you would find all here after so long an absence, for old Jeanne seems fonder of knitting with her fellow-crones at the fountain than looking after the place. Just now I discovered Wolf locked into a little room at the back of the house without a vestige of either food or water. I thought he would never stop drinking when I filled his wooden bowl at the spring, and as to bread, he ate more than his share of the sweet loaf which I took out of the oven at home before I started, and the remainder of which you must eat now;" and Angela busied herself laying the cloth and spreading temptingly the ready-cooked meal which she had with womanly foresight conveyed from the inn to the chalet, knowing well that the means of preparing a

supper suitable for an invalid would not be found practicable in a house which had been uninhabited for so long a time.

"Wolf might, then, have been dead, had we not by a lucky chance returned home to-day," observed Pierre, caressing his favourite's head; "the person who gave Janette directions to lock him up shall tell me the reason why, and I shall ascertain all about it before I rest to-night. Mother, dost thou know aught about it?" Pierre asked this question with a sudden keen suspicion, having seen, as he raised his eyes from the dog's head, a nervous spasm passing over Pauline's face, which was quickly turned aside to conceal her emotion from view.

"I gave directions that the dog should be kept within doors until our return home," she answered, with an enforced calmness of manner.

"Why, mother?"

"Because, had it been free to come and go as it liked, it would surely have followed thee to Fedele's house."

"And what then?"

"Marie did not wish, as I explained to thee before, to have the dog running about the place."

"But thou hast never told me why. That is what I should like to have explained."

His mother did not answer, though her cheek flushed with vexation at the tone of command which Pierre's voice had assumed.

"Angela," cried Pierre, in a somewhat less sharp key, though it made the girl start suddenly round from the table, where she was standing with bent head and distressed attitude.

"You are at least straightforward in your replies.

Can you tell me why Marie has taken this sudden resolution that Wolf shall not enter her place? In what way has the dog harmed her or hers? Answer me that question, for I see by thine eyes that thou knowest it."

"I do not know. Until now I had not heard of the matter; but I can guess," replied Angela, in a low, troubled voice.

"And what dost thou guess?"

"That she is fearful lest it might harm those she loves."

"Angela, answer me this one more question," said Pierre, leaning forward with crimson cheek and excited, angry manner.

"I will answer no more questions," replied Angela, returning his look with an earnest gravity of manner, while with an involuntary action she withdrew one step farther from him.

"And thou thinkest, perhaps, that I am such a fool that I cannot also frame a guess as well as thee!" cried Pierre. "I tell thee this, that by their ill-timed interference and unjust refusals they have planted suggestions in my mind which, bad as I am, had never arisen there before, and which, I vow, I will make use of now to their own injury and despite. I am not a child, any longer to be hoodwinked by a pack of women; and thou, Angela, who art fickle as the wind in thy moods and fancies, thou also"—

"I—what?" asked Angela, with a white face and lips that visibly trembled.

"Pierre, Pierre! cease with thy rough words," cried Pauline Milano, rising excitedly and pacing the kitchen; "it is bad enough to heap scorn on an old woman's head, but to raise thy voice in that fierce

manner to a girl is the resource of a coward and a vaurien."

Pauline's words had only the effect of raising Pierre's anger to its utmost pitch.

"I will raise my voice, if needful, till I split the very walls of the house; and who shall dare to call me coward or vaurien?"

"Aye, and thy hand too, I doubt not, as thou didst on the hill-side in Sebastian's clover-field. Thou art a truly brave man, and one to make a mother's heart proud."

Pauline spoke with a heat and bitterness unusual to her nature; but the sight of Angela's pale, scared face had roused all the sympathies of her heart and filled her with an anger and contempt which she could not control, and Pierre listened to her reproaches with eyes that widened and contracted at each word, like lightning flashes from a thunder cloud, and with a heart that smote with the strength of a forge-hammer against his side.

When she had finished speaking, Pauline went out through the kitchen door and mounted the chalet steps, trembling in every limb, and fearful of the next words which might reach her ears.

But Pierre, with livid face and the aspect of one who writhes with some sudden fierce pain, answered not a word. He sank upon a chair, crossed his hands on the kitchen table in front of him, and bent his head forward upon them with a groan.

Angela, riveted to the spot with horror, fear, and tenderest sympathy for both these disturbed and angry hearts, stood by, silent and awed, feeling that she, by her words, had been the innocent cause of this most unhappy quarrel; and now, Pauline's last reproach

had brought her more prominently forward and placed her in a position of the utmost distress and perplexity.

She knew not, poor child ! what might come next ; a burst of terrible, unrestrained fury, or a hailstorm of reproaches and accusations. She was not prepared for what really did follow, namely, a tempest of such bitter tears as men seldom shed, and which women can never see unmoved.

Angela stood aghast. To another she would at once have proffered comfort and words of solace suited to the occasion, but here her fine tact and perception told her was a grief that for the moment she dared not meddle with, nor did Pierre even appear conscious of her presence. He stretched out one arm and with clenched hand smote upon the table, making the white bread crumbs leap into the air, and Angela's heart cease for a moment its quick throbs of sympathetic anguish.

All at once he thrust back his chair and stood up. Angela quailed before the expression that was now upon his face and at the glance which he cast on her as he approached the spot where she stood.

" Angela," he staggered in his walk and clutched at the table as he advanced, " Angela, thou hast heard my mother's words."

Angela bowed her head in reply, but uttered not a syllable. The look in Pierre's face struck her dumb.

" Such words, let them be ever so true, are not lightly forgotten. Their very truth is their sting. With this hand I struck thee, Angela, in the meadow, and with this hand I will now presently make an end of the most miserable being that ever walked the earth. Thou mayest tell my mother this, that she will

soon be freed from the disgrace of a coward for her son."

"To attempt one's life is the act of a true coward," replied Angela, in a voice which to her own ears sounded miles away, and she mechanically drew nearer to the wall for support, though she fixed her eyes with the unconscious intensity of a great despair upon the angry face before her.

"And thou, also, Angela, thou also callest me coward. Those who—but, Angela," cried Pierre, his voice in a moment falling from sudden fury to amazement and questioning fear, "Angela, Angela, what ailest thee? speak! art thou also afraid that I shall strike thee as I did in the meadow, or—" catching a glance of unspoken anguish in the half-glazed eyes before him, "or, can it be," he took a step nearer to her and snatched eagerly at her hand—"or can it be, that there lives still one heart that would be sorry to see me die?"

Angela drew her cold hand mechanically out of his, but she uttered no word of denial, while Pierre's gaze seemed to search into the very recesses of her soul.

"Angela, I will not trouble thee with many words; say but this much, dear heart, answer me truly; wouldst thou grieve to see me die?"

"I would," she murmured.

"Wouldst thou grieve for me as thou wouldst for any other?"

"More, much more," she answered, with a simple emphasis of manner.

Pierre paused, still fixing his earnest tear-stained eyes upon the fair face before him, then in a lower voice he added humbly, "and wherefore, Angela?"

Angela opened her lips hesitatingly, but closed them again with a kind of slight shiver which left her even whiter than before.

"I—I who am well known to be the worst lad in all Protogno," continued Pierre, in the same low voice modulated by an overpowering sense of deepest humility, yet strong with an almost impossible hope, "I, whose own mother can no longer find room for me in her heart : it is not possible."

The pleading gaze, the cruel pain visible in every feature of Pierre's face moved Angela from her sickness and stupor, and with a sudden confusion she made answer :

"Thou knowest, Pierre, without my speaking it again and again what it is that I feel regarding thee."

"What, what?" he asked, bending low to read her eyes ; but while she hesitated to give the required answer it seemed already spoken in his heart.

"Yes, I know it," he said bitterly, raising himself up with a certain dignity born of the bitterest disappointment, "thou needest not to speak. Thou thinkest I am unfit to die. It is not for me—Pierre—thou carest, nor yet for my love and hatred, but for that miserable phantom of a soul, the destruction of which haunts thee, and which has no more existence in my vile body than thou hast heart in thine, beautiful and fair as thou art." As Pierre uttered these words he turned quickly aside and moved with hurried steps towards the door, nor did he look back when a low cry of pain reached his ear ; he only tossed his head defiantly and said, as he stepped out into the garden :

"There, there, comfort thyself, Angela, a soul so precious in thy sight shall not be thrown away for nothing. I make it a whole present to thee, to do

with it what thou wilt. For the rest do not trouble yourself about me. I shall yet live to turn my life to some account."

"Pierre!" cried Angela, stretching out her hands supplicatingly, "wilt thou not listen?"

But Pierre would not listen. He strode down the garden path, and whistling to his dog, moved proudly out of sight.

CHAPTER IX.

A GATHERING OF CRONES.

So bleak and triste a winter had not been known in Protogno for fifty years as the one which followed upon Pierre's return to his own home. The snow fell in large feathery floating flakes or in sleety particles almost all the day long, varied only by black and bitter frosts which knit the snow into slippery banks and made the roads almost impassable. The very air seemed composed of slanting lines of icicles which penetrated to the lungs and heart, and made those who were exposed to its cruel influence wither under the very sharpness of the breath they drew, and only those driven forth like the wild animals in search of their food wandered out on the bleak hills and moors that bordered the little Italian village. Even in the day-time the streets in the village were strangely silent. The musical tinkle of the horses' bells was now seldom heard except on rare days of sunshine, when the frost yielded for a few hours to the superior force of the noonday heat. No charrette was seen in the town, and the business of the market was at a standstill. The village fountain was frozen, and the crones who usually gathered there had to discuss the scandals of the town over their smoky stoves, or in the warm nooks of the forge, where Frau Gartmann, the wife of the blacksmith, foremost amongst gossips, held a reception every afternoon, and where the "vin du pays," served up

smoking hot in quaint old tankards, warmed the vitals of those who partook of it, and opened their lips to revelations of their neighbours' lives and doings which even the most fertile imagination could never have given birth to unaided by the rich blood of the grape.

Here Janette Chaudron's croaking voice might be heard, and her withered form seen squatting toad-like in a dark corner, with eyes small and evil which saw all that was bad in every one, and ears busily absorbed in hearing all the village tittle-tattle which she found so necessary to the ripening of her plots and the carrying out of her vile and secret practices.

Fair indeed, and priceless above rubies, must have been the life and character of her whose name was not bandied about among these idle, thriftless folk, who would fain, if they could, drag down to their own level those who shone as high above them as the stars in the purple firmament of heaven.

Nor did the village lords of creation come off much better at their hands. Even the soberest and quietest inhabitants of the town had secret sins laid to their charge, of which they themselves lived in a happy state of unconsciousness.

Michel, the old *chef* of the inn, formed a constant theme for these censorious and greedy tongues, his chief crime consisting in the fact that he did not open his kitchen door to needy vagabonds, and give or sell to them his master's property, as others of his class in Protogno so generously did. Because also he did not contribute bottles of the red wine to these evening meetings at the forge; and, above all, because he hated Janette Chaudron, and would not suffer her shadow to darken the doors of his kitchen, therefore

he was a fair prey for all that human malice could invent, or human tongues spread.

This fine old specimen of an honest man, now waxing blind and deaf, and much crippled with rheumatism, was, according to their evil theories, a special subject of wrath and condemnation from above. The late failure of his eyesight was attributable to the fact that on a certain night in the previous winter, when the snow was falling in ceaseless, heavy flakes, and the air was cuttingly cold, Michel had given Christine Delemont and little Paul shelter for some hours in the kitchen of the inn, without his master's consent or knowledge, old Marco Biondina being absent at the time. They related, too, how it was Angela, the innkeeper's beautiful daughter, who had, when applied to for permission, not only consented to their sleeping in the inn, but had also prepared with her own hand a special portion for the child, and though she could not leave her father's guests for more than a moment, as it was supper-time, she had herself brought the smoking dish to the kitchen door, and placed it before the boy, though one glance at his pinched and sorrow-stricken face had sent her back more swiftly than she came, with eyes full of stinging tears, which she was obliged to wipe away before she could present herself again before a curious and admiring company.

For this crime poor old Michel had been struck blind; thus Christine always showed her gratitude for favours. Not altogether blind, for he still acted as cook, but Angela's skilful fingers and willing heart were always at his service, and the inn, in point of its table, suffered nothing from the failing sight of its purveyor.

This affair of Christine had created rather a hubbub in the town, for when the landlord returned, he took quite a different view of the matter from his daughter. He was a man full of superstition, and who always lived in dread lest some evil chance might exert a baneful influence on his business; and what was more likely to blast the character of the inn than the fact which already in two short days was blown over the town, that Christine, the detested witch, had lodged under his roof?

He was incensed with Angela, and spoke more harshly to her than he had ever done before. He ordered the old *chef* from his house, and the blaze of his passion was terrible to see and hear; but Michel knew his master's temper, and though he went for a time into his own room, and disappeared from the kitchen, having first set all in readiness for the preparation for the evening meal, he was waiting only for his master's call to return to his work, with a quiet, if somewhat saddened mien, but no sorrow in his heart for the crime for which he had been threatened with dismissal.

Angela, on the contrary, took her father's harsh words to heart. She wept until her eyelids hung heavily over her beautiful eyes, and she went about with bent head and sorrowful gait, watching always for the moment when her father would open his arms to her again, and restore her to his favour.

Nor had she to wait long. To remain for any length of time at variance with Angela would have taken a harder heart than his, and soon peace was restored between them, but the noise of the quarrel had been such that the village equilibrium was not easily re-established. From house to house, from

door to door, it reverberated. All eyes were fixed on Angela when she appeared in the inn garden, or walked in the evenings to Maria Fedele's house.

It was a matter of amazement, and in some cases of actual disbelief, that Angela had in no way come under the evil influence of Christine's blighting presence.

"I know it as a fact," cried one, "that she has suffered, though she hides it cleverly from the public eye. Ever since the evening she placed the little idiot's supper before him her right hand has been palsied, and she can scarce lay the plates on the supper-table without letting it be seen. The other night, when the mayor of the town was dining with old Marco, and the talk fell on Christine and her doings, she let a whole tureen of soup fall from her hands, and it ran down the floor like a river, tumbling over the doorsteps in a waterfall, and leaving a stain on the boards which it will take many a long day to wash off."

Yet, strange to say, as the originator and recipient of this scandal passed by the inn garden a few days later, Angela, seeing them peep curiously over the hedge, came forwards herself, and wrung them so warmly with her right hand that any suspicion as to its want of force must have vanished from their minds, and joining them presently in the inn-parlour, she drew her knitting from her pocket and, all unconsciously, with swiftly flying fingers, gave, as she worked, a visible denial to these doubts and rumours.

"Never mind," croaked Janette, from her dark corner in the forge, as the subject of Christine had been duly introduced to flavour their evening coterie, and wonders had been freely expressed that as yet

the innkeeper's daughter had escaped all the prognosticated evils though months had now passed away, and she only grew more beautiful in all their eyes, and more loved and valued in the town; "never mind," croaked Jeannette, in her hoarse, guttural voice; "you all look on me as a false prophet, but, believe me, the day is close at hand——"

"How so? What meanest thou, Jeannette?" asked another voice out of the gloom, a voice hoarser than her own, perhaps, but not seasoned with the concentrated spite of her cruel old age.

"I mean what I say; her day is close at hand. Thou, Pierre Milano, whose eyes I see burning through the darkness like an angry cat's, thou wilt live to see that day."

"I have been told," chimed in the blacksmith's wife, as she replaced an empty tankard on the shelf beside her, "that the reason why Mistress Angela has escaped so long is because she wears a charm round her neck both day and night—a charm against the evil eye. The other evening, when the sleeve of her dress took fire, Gretchen, my girl, was in the kitchen, and snatched the bodice all burning off from her shoulders. Gretchen is a clever girl, I can tell you, and has her wits about her. She cut the lace with a snick and had it off her in a trice."

"Well?" asked the listening audience, "but what happened?"

"Happened! Why, my girl saved her life; that is all," replied their hostess, whose faculties, influenced by the contents of the now empty tankard, had wandered from their original theme.

"Yes, but about the charm?"

"Aye—yes! the charm; why, Gretchen told me

she had a kind of a wooden heart hung round her throat by a bit of string, and when she found that her neck was a trifle scorched, she put up her hand quickly, and said, with a strange smile, 'Oh, my poor heart; is it safe?' and when Gretchen would have known what it was and why she wore it, or some such simple question, she said, 'It is only an old peach-stone, but it was carved for me years ago, and I wear it as a charm.'

"'Against the evil eye?' asked Gretchen.

"She did not, I believe, reply directly to this question, but said something which Gretchen did not understand about overcoming evil with good, and she moved away as if to avoid questioning; so I suppose she does not care for people to know aught about it. Yet she is a strange girl, and the things which frighten other people almost into fits have no effect upon her. Now, there is my mother," cried the blacksmith's wife, replenishing her tankard, "if she hears the cat mew in the night she begins to pray and cry and cross herself till it is vain to think of sleep, and only yesterday morning, when standing in the doorway talking to Angela, I saw a large black spider crawling on her dress, I would have crushed it, she only laughed, and taking the black brute off her dress quite delicately in her own fingers she placed it on the upper ledge of the door, and added, with a laugh, 'Why do you believe such follies? Why, if spiders could harm one I should be dead years ago,' and so mocking at my fears, she went back into the kitchen."

"Aye, just like her," exclaimed Janette; "but she may mock; the day will come soon when she shall know the meaning of 'grand chagrin.' She thinks

she may trifle with all such warnings, but, take my word for it, trouble is close at hand. Only yesterday, old Marco came to my house to report to me of many curious and ill-boding omens which he had noticed of late in his house."

"Of what kind?" asked the neighbours, gathering in a knot around the withered figure in the corner.

"Of many a kind, and all of evil import. For one thing, the house is becoming a regular receptacle of rats, and they swarm in the kitchen, the larder, and even in the bedrooms. The guests are loud in their complaints, as at night they scamper across the boards, and sometimes even across the beds and tables. Nothing can drive them away—dogs, nor cats, nor traps; and if he cannot find a means to rid himself of them, his inn will soon be deserted."

"Biondino was a fool to build his granary just beside his kitchen," observed the blacksmith with a somewhat rude laugh; "while it was full the rats needed not to search for their supper, but now, in mid-winter, they must find their living somewhere," and Gartmann, with a snort of contempt, brought his hammer down heavily on the anvil.

"Aye, aye," snarled Janette, "they may find their living, no doubt, but others may find their death. Ever since Christine, that vile witch, slept in his inn, Marco has never had a day's comfort; his receipts have decreased and his crops have failed, and now the rats will drive all his customers away; but he came to the right place when he came to consult me. I have given him a rare hint, worth his own weight in gold, and that would be no small sum;" and Janette's harsh laugh resounded through the cave-like building.

"What hint did you give him?" asked the black-

smith's wife, whose own house was not free from the encroachments of the ill-omened animals.

"Ah, that is a secret one does not give away," croaked Janette, greedily; "neither would I have thee speak of the matter abroad, for if the old *chef* were to hear that I had put out the tip of my nail in the business he would never consent to using the charm which I have suggested to his master, and I have my character at stake as well as others. One does not sit up all night combating the works of darkness, and seeing sights would make a strong man's heart fail, to give one's secrets for nothing."

"Thou makest but small bones of drinking thy neighbours' good wine for nothing," replied the mistress of the club, whose anger was always close at her elbow, "nor does it need for one to sit up all night jabbering with imps and such like, to see strange sights; I can tell thee that. Ask my husband if my words are not true. He and I were eye-witnesses of a sight that, I warrant thee, thou, with all thy knowledge of familiar spirits, hast never seen."

"Silence!" cried her husband, who heard his wife's excited voice rising over the clamour of the forge. "I bid thee, only last night, to hold thy tongue on that subject. What matters it to other folk what we saw?"

"It matters a great deal," she replied angrily, "and I will straightway tell it to Janette and these others, for the remembrance of it has burnt into my head like a coal, and I shall have no peace until I find out its signification."

The blacksmith shrugged his shoulders and continued his work, while his wife, with bated breath and largely-dilated eyes, told her story.

"Thou knowest the little gate beyond the road

where Gartmann keeps his boat in the summer. Well, my husband had an order this month back to repair something that had gone amiss with the little church on the hill. The lightning-conductor had been knocked askew in the late storm, and as the lake was frozen, we could more easily make a short cut across to the foot of the hill, for I had to drive home a few goats we had yonder in the middle pasture, and which we feared might be lost in the bad weather. So we got across and climbed the hill, my husband, myself, and the mule, for he had all his tools to carry, and with much difficulty, slipping and falling, and sliding at every step, we made our way up the side of the mountain to the church. I was just dog-tired when I got there, and scarce could drag my limbs up the belfry stairs, where I had to give my husband a hand with his tools, and heavy enough they were too ; my elbows and wrists ache still at night with the weight they were, when one had at the same time to climb up a narrow staircase with never a handrail to hold on by. Well, to make a long story short, when I got up to the little wooden room near the belfry, I sat down on the ground and fell asleep."

"Thou mayst as well confess the truth, Lisa ; there was a good bottle of red wine in thy basket, as well as thy husband's tools," laughed the blacksmith loudly ; "that much, at least, of thy story thy friends will have no difficulty in believing."

Lisa treated her husband's words with a silent contempt, merely shrugging her wide shoulders with indifference, and proceeded with considerable earnestness. "Well, I was just having a dream about some dreadful creature, I cannot now remember exactly what it was like, but it was pursuing us on the ice, and

I was stumbling, and falling, and crying, and my husband was making cuts at it with his hatchet, and shouting at me to keep out of the way, when all at once I started up and found that he was really in the turret with me, and bidding me rise up and come over beside him.

"He was stooping down, looking out through one of the slits in the church tower, and his two eyes were just leaping out of his head like a madman's.

"Ha, ha!" roared the blacksmith, "thou knowest how to tell a story well when thou settest about it."

"Don't listen to him!" cried Lisa, excitedly, "it is all as true as I stand here! It was he who called me over, and bid me look out across the valley to the brow of the hill opposite—to l'Estrange's hill, beyond the Count's cottage and the wood; thou hast been there, Janette, before now, and canst affirm what all the world knows, that it is haunted!"

"Aye, aye," croaked Janette, whose eyes scintillated red in the momentarily increasing gloom; "aye, I know it well: where the mill stands on the ridge. I would not have my foot in the shoe that climbed that hill now-a-days. One thing is certain, that no foot ever has returned that went that way since the night old Madeline l'Estrange was hung there. I was present at the hanging of her, and it was a sight to make the dead rise out of their graves and shiver in their shrouds. Aye, aye, well I remember they brought her up the ladder, and hung her from the arm of the mill. They say we were scarce down the hill before the wolves were howling round the old witch's body, and snapping at her feet as they dangled in the air. I am an old woman now, and I was a girl then, but I can see still the drifts of snow

they dragged her through to the foot of the gallows, and the face of her son (and he was her only son) as they forced them asunder, and drove her on to her death. Such a screech he gave ! I heard it well, for he stood just by my side, and it went through my head like a knife; and she heard it, too, for she turned of a sudden like one mad, and shook off the hands of those that clutched her ; but when she found she could not come near him she flung her arms up into the air, and cried out, 'Master, master, I beseech thee look upon my son !' It was her familiar spirit, no doubt, she called to, and much he heeded her, for that same night the lad died. They said something went wrong with his heart, for he just went off in a kind of sleep, and never spoke a word. But it was an ugly business from first to last, though richly Madeline deserved her death, and that no one can deny."

Even Lisa Gartmann, who had at first manifested some impatience at Janette's interruption of her narrative, had grown so interested in the recital that she seemed for a moment forgetful that all eyes and ears were on the alert to hear the end of her own history.

She paused a moment to gather up the slackened chain of her thoughts, and then, much impressed with the horror-struck expression of the faces gathered around her, she continued, in a low, nervous voice :

"My husband made me put my face to the turret-hole, and, said he, 'Look across, Lisa, to the hill yonder, and tell me what thou seest.' At first I looked every way but the right way, but, all in a moment, I saw as it were the old mill on fire. There were flames coming out through the windows, and smoke streaming up in a black cloud to heaven."

"Aye, aye," growled Janette. "They have queer doings up there, no doubt ; fine pranks, with no one to interfere, or bid them depart to the place they come from. I should like to have the handling of them, and bringing them to bell, book, and candle ; but it would be a long, wild walk for such an old woman as I am."

"Go on, go on," cried the same hoarse voice which had spoken once before ; "go on, Lisa, and let us hear the end of it," and, looking up, the blacksmith's wife saw Pierre, with pallid face and scared eyes, leaning forward to catch each syllable she uttered.

"I saw, as I tell you, flames of fire coming out of the windows, and smoke curling up and swaying to and fro overhead in the wind, like a figure of darkness floating over the mill, which looked for all the world like a great white skull with fire coming out of its eyes and nostrils ; and the old sails stood up on the side of it as like to a pair of horns as—as——"

"The old cow's in the barn," suggested her husband, to aid her flagging wits.

"Never mind him," cried Frau Gartmann with sudden fury at the many interruptions ; "he pretends to mock at what I tell you ; but this I know, he rose last night at midnight in such a terror as I never saw mortal man or woman in before, and said we were all bewitched, and we should leave the house, aye, and the town, as soon as the morning broke ; and now he bangs away at his anvil as if he had the strength of a bullock and never knew what fear meant."

"And if I *were* afraid (which I do not deny), whose fault was it ?" shouted her husband, in manifest annoyance. "I tell you what, neighbours." Gartmann laid down his hammer and advanced into the midst

of them with a face dark with anger. "From the hour she saw that sight on the hill-top she has never ceased wailing in my ear that it was a warning she should die and that quickly, till she had me in that state of panic that last night, when I ought to have been sleeping soundly, like any other hard-working man, I was dreaming that I saw her stretched out in her coffin, and so I started up, believing for a moment it was true. And now she brazens it amongst ye all, as it becomes her well to do ; but I tell ye what, good people (silence, Lisa !), for I will say now what I have threatened many a day before to say : my father built this forge for work, and not to be the resort of idle women who have no other object than to whet their tongues against their neighbours' characters. Out with you, one and all ! I am sick of the sight of you. It is time to make an end to this unseemly custom, which would turn the chief forge in the village into a tap-room, and make the owner of it a laughing-stock to all the world."

Thus Gartmann, being in a towering rage, cleared his forge of the women ; and Lisa, his wife, stood by silent while they trooped out into the frosty air ; but a lowering storm was gathering, and when Janette, whose withered form brought up the rear of the guests, had passed out with the rest, Frau Gartmann, with head erect, followed in her train.

"Lisa, come back !" cried her husband, angrily, but she did not even deign a glance in reply. "Come back," he urged, seizing her by the arm. "Thou art foolish to rush off so in a passion."

"I shall be more foolish when I return home," she replied bitterly, and, shaking off his arm, she went out into the street.

CHAPTER X.

NOISES IN THE STREET.

IT was the morning after the scene at Gartmann's, and Pierre was seated in his own room, moodily poring over the lore book given him by Janette Chaudron.

The weather was now too severe for him to spend his time hanging about the Pont d'Esprit, and the river itself was in parts frozen, while the woods were slippery in the extreme.

But he had ample food for thought and earnest reflection in the statements and suggestions he had heard advanced and supported the evening before, not only in Gartmann's presence, but affirmed afterwards by Gartmann himself; for Pierre had remained behind when all the women had been expelled, and had questioned the blacksmith as to the truth of the whole matter, and had received undoubted testimony as to its accuracy. Though Gartmann had impressed upon him his desire that the matter might be allowed to drop, in those days of superstitious excitement one could never tell on whose head the suspicion and anger of the community might not fall, and those who themselves were shaken like reeds by the recurrence of evil omens and disturbing signs became often the victims of their own foolish imaginings, and were looked upon by their neighbours and acquaintances at first with doubt and distrust, and afterwards with horror and detestation.

Pierre could see by Gartmann's nervous manner

and agitated speech that his mind was much disturbed by the remembrances of what he had witnessed, and harassed by his wife's suggestions of coming misfortunes, and he gave him his promise before he left the forge that he would look into Janette's book of signs to see what such sights might portend, and ascertain if there were not some potent charm powerful enough to protect him and his family from the consequences of having been spectators, however unwillingly, of the abhorred mysteries.

So now, with head bent, and eager searching eyes, he sat by the stove poring over the leather-covered, dog's-eared book which was to him the keystone of his daily life, though just at this moment he was not thinking of the Gartmanns, but was on a search which had not their interests at stake apparently, but rather those of another whose declining fortunes and approaching troubles Janette had, only last night, so remorselessly foretold.

Pauline Milano had hated the very sight of this book; its greasy, spotted cover and its rust-stained leaves filled her with disgust; its contents were acting like a slow poison on her son's temperament and character, and this morning, as she sat mending his stockings in the window, it made her heart ache and her eyes smart with tears she dared not shed, to see the intent expression of pain and sorrow which darkened his brow, and to hear the deep, unconscious sighs which told of a heart troubled about many things.

Since the afternoon on which she had so sharply chidden Pierre for his conduct to Angela, a wide gulf seemed to have opened between them, and the little cloud of constraint, only the size of a man's hand, which had risen comparatively lately on the horizon

of their daily life, had now suddenly expanded to an alarming degree, and Pauline felt that at any moment a tempest might burst over her head which would shake the very lintels of their mutual love, and probably destroy beyond hope of remedy the strong ties of affection which had once held them so closely bound to each other.

It was a glorious winter's morning; the sun blazed outside on the frozen drifts of snow piled here and there by the roadside, and shone brilliantly down upon the little ice-pools and frosted shrubs in the garden beneath. The sky was of an almost purple blue, and the sharp, white peak of the mountain beyond seemed in its glittering beauty to stand forth purposely to be admired.

As Pauline's eyes turned from the ever-haunting attraction of scrutinising her son's most inscrutable face, they fell on the peaceful beauty and grandeur of the scene without, and her heart, momentarily exalted by its loveliness, gave one of those sudden, electrical throbs of hope or happiness which sometimes startle one, coming, as they often do, in the darkest hour of one's life, and lighting up with a bright delusive glory the misty landscape of a dark and disappointed heart; a realisation, as it were, of past happiness, of a future of great and immeasurable glory, and a present which, if grasped now, at this instant, with an undoubting hand, might turn all it touched to gladness and joy.

Pauline stood up and glanced hastily at her son. A fierce and hungry longing had come over her to strain him closely to her bosom, and to break with the ardour of her great love the icy barrier which so cruelly intervened between them.

No corresponding glow of affection showed itself, however, on Pierre's face. Attracted by his mother's sudden movement, he looked up and their eyes met, but his was a totally unconscious and irresponsible glance. He saw her, and yet he saw her not; his thoughts were far away.

Pauline turned quickly back to the open casement. She saw that she had no part in his thoughts, and covered her eyes with her hand. The moment of exaltation had passed: the chill of a cold reality had supervened.

"Mother, shut that window, I beg of thee," cried Pierre, peevishly; "the air is piercingly cold, and besides, Wolf is driving me mad, whining and straining at his chain in the garden below. I must read each sentence again and again before I can find out its real meaning."

Pauline mechanically pushed over one of the shutters. She had the other in her hand, and was preparing to close it too, when she paused and listened.

There was a strange far-off sound making itself heard through the frosty air; a sound which, as it drew nearer, thrilled through Pauline's frame, and made her cheeks pale. She glanced back for a moment at Pierre, but his eyes were riveted on the page before him, and his fingers were tightly pressed into his ears.

"What,—what are they doing? They are murdering some one in the wood—such shrieks, such screams! What is it, Antoine?" cried Pauline, beneath her breath, to the boy, who had just rushed up to her gate, and now stood, panting and excited, in the garden beneath.

"Is Pierre within?"

"Yes, yes! but what is the cause of all this hubbub?"

"I must see Pierre first, and tell him."

"Pierre is here with me in the room." Once more Pauline glanced round, but Pierre was in the same attitude of intense study, utterly absorbed in his reading, and no sound from the outer world had as yet reached his ears or mind.

"May I come up for a moment, and speak with Pierre?" cried Antoine, impatiently, from the garden beneath, for the noise and shouting were increasing and drawing nearer, and Pauline, as she glanced towards the wooden bridge which crossed the river just where it issued from the wood, could see people hurrying forward, either to join in the riot or to inquire into its cause.

"I must know first what it is thou wouldst say to him," replied Pauline, upon whose mind a sickening conviction of the cause of all this disturbance was beginning to dawn. "Pierre is resting within, and his ankle is still too weak to join in any unseemly riot, or run at the heels of the rabble. Canst thou not tell me, Antoine, the cause of all this noise?"

"I must see Pierre first; I promised him. But where is he that he does not hear it for himself?" Antoine glanced upwards at the window, and then quickly askance at the upper door of the *châlet*, which opened under the projecting eaves at the head of the wooden staircase.

"He is reading; he does not wish to be disturbed. For mercy's sake be quick, Antoine, and tell me the meaning of this row! It makes one's blood curdle to hear it!"

"I will come up the stairs and whisper it to thee,"

cried Antoine, looking nervously towards the open window and the door in the gallery above him. "Is Pierre in the room with thee?"

"Aye, aye, but he hears nothing—his fingers are in his ears; be quick with thy news, like a good lad."

Antoine mounted the chalet stairs until he stood more immediately beneath the window, whence a covert whisper might perhaps have reached a listener's ears, and yet escape those of one seated within.

"They have caught Christine in the wood, and are hurrying her into the town."

"Merciful God! They are not going to kill her?"

"I do not know; I cannot tell. When first I heard the screaming I was close to the river's edge. I looked across, and saw them dragging some one forward, and heard them crying out, 'Christine! Christine!'"

"Hush!" cried Pauline, excitedly, and placing her finger on her lips, for there was a sound of some one moving in the room behind her; then, leaning further out, she whispered in an almost inaudible voice, while she pointed towards the gallery door, "Come up, and I will speak to thee there."

She hurried round quickly, and made a step forwards, but was stopped instantly by the voice of Pierre, who was now standing in the centre of the room, with the open book in his hand, and an angry, startled expression in his face.

"What is this outlandish noise, and to whom hast thou been talking? Tell me, what is all this yelling and shouting for outside?"

Without waiting for his mother's reply Pierre rushed to the window, just in time to see Antoine gliding softly up the gallery steps towards the doorway.

"Antoine, what is it? Why art thou scurrying up the steps like a dog with a kettle at its tail? Listen! how they shriek down there! Silence, Wolf! One cannot hear one's own voice with thy perpetual howling."

There was a moment's pause between Pierre's question and Antoine's reply, and in that lull a voice more shrill than all the rest, though still distant, yet raised to its utmost pitch, revealed to Pierre's ears the cause of this most unusual commotion: "Christine, Christine! to death with her."

"Christine!" echoed Pierre, with a start and a cry full of exultant victory. "Antoine, dost thou hear? it is Christine; ah, ah, wretch! they have trapped her at last; she shall have her deserts now, the cursed were-wolf, and that quickly." He let the book of fate fall from his hand in his excitement, and pale with an anger which leaped in a moment to a boundless fury, he turned towards his bed and stretched out his arm to the sickle which had lain so long uselessly suspended from a nail above it, whose stained and rusty edge had reaped no golden corn or silvery barley for many a long year.

"Pierre! thou shalt not go forth with that mad rabble. I will not have it," cried Pauline Milano, in a voice whose excitement and passion might have borne comparison with that of her son. "I am thy mother, and I will not permit of thy joining it."

"Ten thousand mothers rolled into one shall not stop me now," cried Pierre, snatching furiously at the sickle, which clung with an awkward tenacity to the rusty crooked nail on which it had so long rested.

"We shall see that," cried Pauline, beneath her breath, as she turned swiftly from him towards the door.

"Let me in," cried Antoine eagerly, from without.

"Have patience, I am coming," replied Pauline, with angry deprecation.

Antoine had meanwhile gained the summit of the gallery steps, and, rushing in by the upper entrance of the chalet, was now beating furiously against the panels of Pierre's door. "Let me in, let me in," he cried still more vehemently; "they are coming down the street; open, open quickly!"

"Open the door!" cried Pierre, in a voice of thunder; "woman, what hinders thee to push back the bolt?" for Pauline was working feverishly at the lock.

Pauline turned as he spoke, and with a face pale with anger and rigid with decision, replied, "Woman as I am, I shall show thee that I am not to be spoken to so by thee; the door is not only bolted but locked, and Antoine shall not enter, neither shalt thou go out!"

Pierre had at this moment succeeded in wrenching the sickle from the wall, the nail having succumbed to his anger, and he now approached his mother with an air of defiant triumph.

"The key is safely put away in my pocket. I will not take it out for thee nor any one," replied Pauline with an assumed calm, which her trembling fingers denied, while she drew her chair from the window and took up her knitting which lay on the sill.

"You will not take it out, you say?" Pierre advanced a step nearer. He strove to speak with a calm equal to that of his mother, but his face was absolutely black with repressed passion, and his voice shook.

"I will not take it out, I have said so already," she replied, and though the steel needles clattered helplessly together, as she held them, she drew the thread round her fingers and feigned a resolute industry.

"If the key is not at once given up, I will tear the door from its hinges. It *shall* be given up!" he added, with a passionate stamp upon the floor, which made the very rafters tremble.

"It shall not," she replied, in an almost inaudible voice.

"What if I force thee to give it up?"

He was bending over her now, and the rust-stained sickle was in his hand. The angry, yelling mob was swiftly approaching, and Antoine, who could not, owing to the clamour outside, hear the fierce argument going on within, beat even more noisily against the panels. She could hear the pitiful pleading cries of the hunted woman, and the jeering howls of triumph with which they were received.

"Wilt thou give it up quietly, or must I make thee yield it?" Pierre placed his hand heavily on his mother's shoulder.

"Go on; it is just like thee," replied Pauline bitterly; "the man who with brute force hurled his sweetheart from his path would not scruple to strike his mother."

Her words were like fuel to fire. He did not strike her, but a cry of such white anger and pain burst from his lips that even she quailed at the sound, and let her knitting fall from her trembling fingers.

"Give me the key, in the name of my dead father, and all the love he gave thee," cried Pierre hoarsely.

Pauline stood up at the appeal, appalled, perhaps, by the expression in her son's eyes. She plunged her hand into her pocket and drew forth the key, but at this moment a piercing cry from Christine smote upon her ear. She had caught sight of Pierre at the window with the sickle in his hand, and knew that her

hour had come. "Save me, save me!" she cried ;
"will no one, in the name of a just God, save me?"

"Yes, yes ; I will."

Pauline advanced one step nearer the window and raised her hand, now tightly clasped over the object it contained. She raised it high over her head ; and as Pierre, guessing her intention, swiftly stretched out his arm to interrupt her, it flew, released from her fingers, through the open window, and falling first on the wooden balustrade of the staircase, leaped off with a loud metallic ring into the deep snow-drift of the garden wall.

For one brief second only, Pierre's eyes followed its descent ; but in that second his resolve was taken. The mob outside was howling to him at the gate to come down and join their sport—a band of iron would not have held him now ; his temper had outstripped all the bounds of common sense and prudence.

"Ah!" he cried, bitterly, "thou thinkest, perhaps, to keep me here like a chained dog ; but we shall presently see whether thou or I art the cleverer. Keep back, woman, at thy peril!" and thrusting his mother aside with his left hand, while with the right he forced the casement open to its widest extent, he leaped out with a blind fury into the air above the gallery steps.

A loud cry burst from Pauline's lips, which seemed to rip the very air open with its agony, for Pierre, falling, as the key had done, heavily against the wooden banisters of the staircase outside, had rolled over on his side, senseless, while a red stream of blood burst freely from his arm where the sickle he had held so tightly clasped in his hand had entered it, piercing it almost to the bone.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FLYING FIGURE.

AN hour afterwards and Pauline was seated by her son's bed, where, after so severe an accident, he had been obliged to lie down for awhile. The noisy rabble, having ascertained that his wound was not one dangerous to his life, but sufficiently severe to prevent his joining in their sport, had hurried on to the small lake beyond the village to enjoy the unwonted excitement of plunging the hated witch Christine in its icy waters—and without all was as still and white as the face of the young man lying on the pillow.

He was calm now—at least outwardly so—a delusive calm, consequent upon the excessive weakness produced solely by the loss of blood from his wound ; but still the troubled, disappointed spirit showed itself in weary sighs, sometimes prolonged into an involuntary groan, and occasionally a restless movement of the hands, as the distant sounds from the “Lac des Sapins” told him of the punishment being carried out on its shores, and in which he could have no share. Only once he started up and cried excitedly, “Mother ! they will not kill her ?”

“Nay, nay, my son ; Heaven grant they are not so bereft of all sense of pity.”

“Pity !” echoed Pierre, with concentrated bitterness. “Mother, when thou speakest thus I sometimes doubt——;” but he did not finish the sentence ;

perhaps, even in his hard heart, some grain of pity lurked, for a glance at his mother's face checked him.

After this not a word was uttered for nearly an hour between mother and son. The chasm was daily growing wider and wider between them—and yet what a measure of burning love was bound up in those two fiery hearts, whose outward semblance at this moment bore the icy stamp of cold indifference! Pauline gazed straight before her at the door and at the white wall opposite. Her son's eyes were open now, and she durst not meet them. While they had remained closed in the first trance of weakness she had not looked thus, nor had she watched with this outward show of indifference. Pierre, turning his eyes occasionally towards hers, knew all this—the traces of bitter tears, the anxious flush still resting on the sad outline of her half-averted face, the ruffled hair standing out in grey rippling disorder from her forehead.

Ah! was this the same mother whom, only a few years ago, he had looked up to as a model of all womanly loveliness, tenderness, and faith? whose waving auburn hair and laughing hazel eyes had given her a high rank among the beauties of Protogno? Was this the same mother who stood of an evening at her chalet door with outstretched arms of love, waiting to welcome them home; yes, *them*, his father (a sharp stab of pain, and a quick movement of his hands on the counterpane), his father! how *he* loved her! No woman ever had such a husband; not even Marie Fedeles, whose happy choice and well regulated house were a proverb with all the wives of the town. Ah! what would happen to Marie if *her* husband were taken from her suddenly, cruelly, in the prime of life? Yes; any one could

answer that question ; she would lie down and die ! Marie a widow, and live ! Impossible ! and yet, perhaps, for her children's sake she would struggle to live on for a while ; those little helpless ones, his children—yes ! for them she would almost have to live. But, what a life ! a dead tree on the hill-side, standing with sapless arms and hollow heart, but guarding still the saplings which clung around its roots for shelter from the storm. Yes ; such would be Marie. And this, all this, this crowning sorrow of all sorrows, had fallen on his mother's head, and yet she had lived on—for what ? for whom ? Another groan and restless movement. Pauline turned round quickly, but Pierre's eyes were closed. It could not have been for him, Pierre, for one so bad and unworthy as himself. See that tear now so silently falling on her apron ; for whom was it shed ? surely, surely not for him !

These thoughts were like fire to Pierre's aching head. He turned with a weary moan on his pillow, and sighed inwardly for sleep.

"Is there anything thou wishest for, my son ?" asked Pauline with a dry sob ; "anything that I could give thee ?"

"Nothing, nothing, mother ; unless, indeed," he added in a hoarse whisper, "unless thou couldst give me peace."

He did not say it bitterly, and, as he spoke, he stretched out his hand towards her, but Pauline did not see the movement ; only the words smote heavily upon her ear, and she replied beneath her breath, "It is vain to ask *me* for that of which thou hast long ago robbed me."

Pierre did not hear her. His hand remained still extended towards her on the coverlid, but his thoughts

had passed off, with the strange facility of weakness beyond the silent room and all its stillness and calm to an autumn evening on the Pont d'Esprit when Angela, with her haymaking rake across her shoulder, had, unasked, stopped to talk with him. The word "peace" had conjured up that bygone scene, and brought the fair young face so vividly before him ; for had she not that day spoken to him of "peace," and told him where *she* had sought and found it ? He had not paid much attention to her words then ; only he had watched her grave, sweet eyes, uplifted full to his face with a pleading earnestness. He remembered the promise, too, that she had won from him that afternoon, with those same wistful eyes, that he would go with her to the church the following Sunday—a promise which he had never kept, though many a Sunday since he had passed her on her way thither, and had turned aside rather than meet her eye. Ah, well ! perhaps it was not too late to redeem the promise. Why not next Sunday ? yes, next Sunday surely he would go with her to the service. Pierre smiled faintly as he saw the blush of joy with which she would make room for him at her side. After church, perhaps, then they might wander up the hill-side, past the saw-mill, to that nook amongst the rocks where the white peak, with its cold, blue glacier, looked down through the gorge on the torrent leaping and foaming, and rushing headlong on to its new life in the valley beneath. There he would once more take his place by her side, and, of course, she would speak to him of heaven ; but was it not heaven enough for him to look into her tranquil eyes, and listen to her low, soft voice ? He could hear the murmur of the little rivulet coming down through the violet-sprinkled

grass ; he could see the yellow heartsease starring the moss with gold, and, far off, the valley winding away through the blue hills, the blue, blue hills, behind whose tranquil borderland the sun set on summer evenings with a wondrous glow, which Angela always said made one long for wings, while Antoine raved and raged over it in one breath because he could not fix its fleeting beauty on his canvas.

Yes ; he knew the very log where they would sit, where the church tower looked up through the chestnut-trees. Angela, he knew, always rested there awhile after church, for from it she could see her mother's grave, and watch lest the village children, as they wandered homewards, might break or hurt the flowers planted upon it, or snatch the crimson berries from the tree which sheltered it. Beautiful crimson berries ! gems of winter now, which Angela wore constantly in her bosom, and for a gift of which Pierre had so often begged in vain. How strangely he confounded these spring flowers with the red berries born of frost and snow ! Pierre must have wandered off now into the land of dreams, for he saw Angela actually seated in the pine shadows by his side. He was conscious of the sunlight flickering down upon the grey rocks, and the green lichens at her feet, and of the prismatic colours which fell on the gossamer threads floating amongst the fir needles overhead. But he forgot in his sweet delusive dream that the snow was lying deep and chill in the valley outside, that the flowers were hidden, and the graves covered, and the quiet church whither he was to accompany Angela next Sunday—— ah, well ! could he have known how that dream was to be realised and his desire granted, would he have smiled as he did now

in his sleep, and stretched out his hand yearningly, as if to grasp some vision of delight?

There was no doubt that Pierre had fallen at last into a deep and restful sleep; his breathing, measured and calm, and the placid expression of his countenance assured his mother that the pain at least of his wound had subsided, and that as yet fever was not threatening in the horizon.

She arose and walked softly towards the window; then, gathering courage, she passed out through the door, and standing upon the gallery overlooking the road, she listened if she might by chance hear any sound, or see any passer-by who, by signs or covert whispers, could convey to her some intelligence of the fate of Christine, for the agonised face of the wretched woman as she gazed up at their house and recognised Pierre at the window had filled Pauline's soul with anguish and a remorseful sorrow which she could not overcome.

But a dull and leaden silence seemed to have fallen outside over Protogno and its inhabitants. Even the blacksmith's hammer, whose clink, clink at all times and seasons could be heard with almost pendulum regularity ringing over the town, was at rest now. The wild rush to the "Lac des Sapins" had evidently carried off in its train all the restless spirits of the village, and so strangely still was the air that Pauline could even hear the dog's troubled breathing in the kennel beneath as, like its master in the room above, it rehearsed in dreams the excitements and perils of its life.

The snow was falling without in soft flakes, though the sun struggled through the dull clouds overhead and lit up the landscape with wonderful

beauty and softness. But Pauline saw none of this beauty or sunshine. Her heart was hot within her, and her spirit felt at war with earth, and sea, and sky, and even heaven itself; and she longed desperately for the day and hour to come when the grave in the churchyard yonder should be re-opened and she could lie down beside her husband, whose last words of tenderest solicitude even now rang in her ears with bitter mockery:

“Pierre, behold thy mother!”

They were uttered when his eyes were glazing and the spirit already passing the borderland of earth; but no eyes full of the most living eager brightness could have conveyed a more earnest appeal; and when the spirit had actually passed away they had still remained with the same intent expression, fixed on the spot where Pierre had stood, though the boy himself had sunk, in the agony of his grief and despair, senseless on the ground by the bedside.

All the morning Pauline had been rehearsing this scene, till every fibre of her heart was quivering with its memory, and she said to herself bitterly, “His very dog beneath, in the kennel there, is more to him than I am—I, who am his mother and his father’s widow! Oh, why is his heart so hardened that he cannot see the light?”

As she spoke she raised her eyes towards heaven, where, indeed, a beautiful bright light was shining behind a thick and lowering snow-cloud; but no comforting rays seemed to penetrate to the darkness of her thoughts, and she turned with a weary sigh to re-enter the house, when she became aware of some sound in the street beyond, a sound so faint as to be

nardly distinguishable, but which yet arrested her attention, for it was like the swift, almost noiseless, step of some hunted animal hastening down the road from the bridge, and although as yet there was nothing in sight, she fancied she could catch quick straining breaths of fear and low sob-like gasps.

It was not long before the figure she watched for came in view, and at the pitiful sight all Pauline's more selfish heart-aches vanished, and a flood of warmest sympathy rushed forth to meet the trouble of the moment.

It was only a child's figure in a coarse white linen dress, and with naked feet, flying with swiftest steps of haste over the newly fallen snow; but what a face! more blanched than the white flakes he trod on; and what eyes of scorching grief and blackest horror!"

"It is Paul!" cried Pauline Milano, startled out of silence and watchfulness by the sudden shaft of pain which struck into her very heart.

The child heard the words and paused. Pierre within, in his bed, started from sleep and heard them also, and, worse than all, the dog in his house by the gate caught the syllables, uttered as they were in fear and haste, and, rising from his sleep with a deep discordant bark, leaped forth from his kennel with a bound and rushed out through the half-open gate upon the road, dragging in his fury his chain so fast and forcibly that the kennel actually moved a foot or two forward through the heavy snow.

"Down, Wolf, down!" cried Pauline, wringing her hands and swiftly descending the wooden stairs of the balcony, "down, cruel dog! How dare you terrify thus the poor child?"

But there was no need to cry thus passionately to

the dog ; the child's terror was already passed and the spasm of anguish ended.

The flying figure was resting now in a white, unconscious heap on the farther side of the road, out of reach of the dog, and out of reach, for the present, of fear or hope.

"Mother," cried a voice from the window, as Pauline would have passed through the gate and rushed to its succour, "mother, come back, come back, and do not thou touch or meddle with aught that concerns Christine or her cub. I tell thee if thou dost I will myself go down, if I die in the attempt to stop thee."

This latter threat, uttered with no doubtful intent, though in a voice weak with faintness, made Pauline hesitate.

She leaned against the gate, and cried out, bitterly, "I cannot leave the child to die. Pierre, Pierre, let me but raise it in my arms, and see if it lives. Pierrel ! I am coming back—do not attempt to descend ;" and Pauline, not trusting to look again at the road, fled forward into the house.

She reached the room in time to see Pierre, defeated in his efforts to descend, by bodily weakness, sinking back exhausted on his bed, and as she passed the window, and looked forth upon the road, she saw also that the child was gone—had vanished, as it were, in a moment from the place where she had just seen it.

She paused, in her amazement, and looked out through the casement.

Pierre turned restlessly on his bed and moaned.

"An angel of God must have had pity on it !" cried Pauline, excitedly, "and snatched it up to heaven."

"Aye, aye" said a rough voice from the bed,

"thou art right, mother—I saw the angel! but, wait awhile; some day—angel or not—she shall repent her ill-timed interference."

"Pierre, how canst thou speak so? Remember, for every idle word we must give account hereafter."

"Aye, aye, the fewer words the better. The angel I saw on the roadside is not yet in heaven. She is kindly delaying her ascent until her wings are strong enough to drag me after her."

"Of whom is the boy talking? Art thou raving, Pierre?—or mad? Whom didst thou see on the road?"

"I saw, as I said before, an angel. Nay, mother, do not lift thy eyebrows with such terror. Angels are not so uncommon upon earth. Father used even to call thee one once—long ago, it is true, and I—I——"

Pierre, who spoke with an ever-increasing bitterness, stopped short with a thick sob, which burst suddenly from his breast.

"Pierre, my son, what is it? Of whom speakest thou? There—tell thy grief to me." His mother bent over him tenderly and tried to slip her arm beneath his head, but he would none of her solicitude, and writhed himself angrily from her grasp.

"Away!" he cried angrily, "what is my grief to thee or her? Is she not the cause of it all? With the face of an angel she has the heart of a——" he would not speak the word, but his eyes said it, and then with a voice of newly acquired strength he raised himself on his bed and shouted forth the fury and passion of his soul:

"I swear, Angela Biondina! I swear I will never speak another word to thee as long as I live on this thrice-accursed earth!"

CHAPTER XII.

"GOOD-NIGHT, PIERRE."

IT was now evening; and Pierre had fallen into a heavy sleep—dreamless and deep.

Pauline had lit the coarse-wicked rushlight and added fuel to the stove. She had prepared some food for Pierre, but he refused it sullenly, and the untasted meal still stood on the table by which she was seated. With a feverish energy she worked on at her knitting: each stitch represented a thought, each round a fresh circle of sorrow. No one had come to her house since the morning, not even to inquire how Pierre fared after his accident. She was a poor lonely widow, unloved and uncared for by any one in the town. It would be better to harden her own heart, and give up thinking of people who never thought of her. Did not the Bible say that to visit the widow and the fatherless in their affliction was pure religion and undefiled; and yet, who came to visit her or pour heavenly consolation into her ears?

"Hush! What is that?" said Pauline, pausing in her work and listening. "Some one is tapping at the door below. That is the second time I have heard it."

She laid her knitting on the table and rose up. The window was closed, so she could not open it without fear of rousing Pierre, and the low, timid tapping, which now she heard again, spoke of a wish for secrecy.

She left the candle lighted on the table and went

down the stairs cautiously ; for the passage was dark, and the stairs steep. She opened the door, and, in the light given out by the white snow which covered the ground outside like a sheet, she recognised Angela Biondina.

"Angela ?—But how pale thou art !"

"Yes, dearest friend ! it is I. May I come in ?"

"Certainly ! But not up-stairs. Pierre is asleep."

"Ah ! then I may not see him ?"

"No, no ! impossible ! He has been beside himself all the evening—raving and raging against everybody—and now, at last, there is peace."

"He is angry with me ?"

"He is angry with everybody," replied Pauline, shortly. Then drawing Angela aside into the kitchen, in which there was no light, except a dull red glow from the hearth, she said quickly :

"Sit down, Angela, and answer me a few questions which my heart hath ached all day to know. What of Christine ? They have not killed her surely ?"

"No, thank Heaven, no !" replied the girl, whose breath, either from quick walking or emotion, was coming in short trembling gasps.

"And the child ; what of it—is it alive also ?"

"Yes, yes, it is safe ; Marie Fedele has taken it into her house ; of course no one knows of it. I fortunately escaped with it in my arms and reached her gate unseen by any one. The folk were all off down at the Mairie, in the yard of which Christine has been locked up ; but oh, what a cruel, cruel day it has been, and what are men and women made of that they can act so ?" Angela placed her hand wearily to her head, as if confused and tired.

"What, indeed !" replied Pauline quickly.

"The child is not much hurt, I trust," continued Angela, nervously; "its head has been very slightly cut about the temple, but it has entered into one of those paroxysms of terror which are so terrible to see, and from which, Marie says, it will presently pass into a swoon. It was so unfortunate, the dog leaping out at that moment, was it not? I had seen the poor child coming across the bridge. It looked at first, with its white hair and dress, like a drift of snow caught up by the wind and whirled along, but presently I recognised the figure. Marie felt sure he would come, and I was watching by the wall of your garden to snatch him up and save him. Poor little Paul!" she added softly, "it hurts me so to think that—but my own father, too, just think, *he* helped to plunge poor Christine in the lake with his own hands, three times, till she had no consciousness left."

"Your father?"

"Yes. Janette Chaudron has raised his mind to a pitch of fury against her. He believes that Christine has bewitched his inn, and is bringing misfortune upon him and all belonging to him. I have reasoned with him, but all in vain; he will not listen to me. They had to break the ice to plunge her in, and she was half dead already with terror, hunger, and weakness. I heard her cries in the kitchen, where I had fled, and so did our old *chef*. Tears even fell from his poor blind eyes to listen to her. If it had not been for the Mayor, they would have killed her."

"How so? What did he do?"

"He acted with his usual good sense and Christian charity. He was away at the village of La Scarpa when they dragged the poor creature past the Mairie, but riding back he heard the shouting down by the

lake, and at once turned off the road to see what was going on. He was only just in time to save her, as Janette Chaudron, and I hear also the blacksmith's wife, had inflamed the people's mind against her to such a pitch of resentment that they were preparing to take away her life on the spot. The Mayor, however, interfered, and, appalled at the cruelty of their proceedings, dispersed the crowd, desiring them to send down a cart from the Mairie to place the miserable woman in, for she was still lying unconscious on the strand, her clothes actually frozen to her limbs, and her face cut and bleeding from contact with the sharp edges of the ice.

"The Mayor remained by the lake until the cart appeared, when he and his servants lifted her into it, but I hear she did not recover consciousness for more than an hour after she had been placed in the guard-room of the Mairie, and that then her cries of agony might have been heard in the woods beyond."

"It would have been better for her if she had been killed outright," moaned Pauline. "The thought that my Silvestro's death has been the cause of all this godless persecution aches in my heart day and night. What has she to live for? Ah! would not I gladly die—aye, this very night, if Heaven willed it; and why should she care to drag on so heavy a burden?"

"She has Paul to live for, you forget; and you—you have Pierre."

"Yes, I have Pierre," replied Pauline coldly.

After this there was a constrained silence for some minutes, during which time the fire flickered up a little, and Pauline caught a sudden glimpse of Angela's face.

It was ghastly white, and large tears were gathered in her eyes. She brushed them quickly away, as the

sudden light glowed over the kitchen, and she saw that Pauline's eyes were fixed upon her.

"I may not see Pierre," she said, with a sudden confusion, which compelled her to speak out the thought nearest to her heart. "I—I!" she laid her head suddenly down into her hands, and burst out crying.

"You are ill," said Pauline, rising up and approaching her, with a manner in which stiffness and true sympathy were strangely blended.

"No, no; not ill," sobbed Angela, "only I am so—so sorry for you all."

"Why should our trouble affect you so? Our shoulders are broad enough to bear our own burdens," said Pauline, allowing the stiffness for a moment to get the upper hand; "there, there! it is no use your saying you are not ill," she continued, as she kindled a light, and set it on the table beside her; "why, the snow outside is rosy compared to your cheeks."

"Yes, that it is," replied Angela, making a shivering effort at a smile. "I feel as if I were a part of the snow. I stood so long in it outside there. I seemed to turn into an icicle."

"Let me warm some wine for you," said Pauline, kindly.

"No, thank you," replied Angela, gratefully, "our good old *chef* made a hot spiced drink for me not an hour ago, and baked a cake expressly for my supper, but, there, I could not eat; my heart was here," said Angela, placing her hand on her white throat, and choking down a sob; "what little I did take has made me feel worse. I have such a burning within, and such a fearful cold without. I think, dear Pauline, I will go home now and lie down awhile, for I must be up at

four to-morrow morning, to prepare the breakfast for the early diligence."

"Angela, you ought not to attempt such duties, when you are quite unfit for them. Why should not the *chef*, who is paid for his services, attend to his own work? I will speak to him on the subject presently."

"No, no; you must not do that," cried Angela eagerly; "I love to help him, and I am so useless; it is one of the few things I can do, to help him thus. You will say good night to Pierre for me," she said, rising hastily, as fresh tears gathered in her eyes; "he will know, I am sure, how sorry I have felt for him, for his fall; for—for the pain he must have suffered; for all that happened to-day that might trouble him."

"Mother," cried an imperious voice from above, "who art thou speaking with down-stairs? Canst thou not come up? The door is open, and a piercing wind is blowing on my bed."

"I must go up," said Pauline, nervously, "he is in no humour to be trifled with to-night."

She lifted the candle from the table as she spoke, and its light fell full upon the beautiful, troubled countenance of her companion.

Its colour was nothing short of ghastly. Her grey eyes, heavy with tears, looked almost black by contrast, and her lips, white as paper, quivered with a ceaseless nervous motion.

Round her neck Angela invariably wore a kerchief of snowy muslin, trimmed with soft white frilling, and to-night, fastening it at the bosom, there was a bunch of beautiful scarlet berries, which also trembled on their stalks with every shivering breath she drew.

"Good-night, dear Angela," cried Pauline, kissing her tenderly, "I cannot delay longer. Thou wilt call

to-morrow morning, and perhaps matters will be quieter here"—pointing with her finger towards the upper storey.

"Yes, yes ; I will come to-morrow," said Angela, half turning away her head, as the long-suppressed tears rolled over their lids, and ran down her cheek, "and thou wilt say good-night to Pierre, and—and give him these;" she plucked the berries nervously from her kerchief; "tell him I gathered them for him ; he knows the tree they grew on. I ——," her hand shook so, the berries fell from her fingers to the ground, and as she stooped to recover them, some sudden rush of sympathy, of pity, perhaps of foreboding, filled Pauline's heart, and she cried, almost without reflecting on her words—

"Come up, my child, and give them to Pierre thyself. He is in a bearish mood, no doubt, but you and I, we know him, and some day, by God's grace, he will be better."

"Yes, yes," murmured Angela, following Pauline up the stairs ; "His grace is sufficient for all things."

The words were scarcely uttered above a whisper, and their sense was lost in the rattle and noise of their ascending footsteps, but Pierre, sitting up in his bed, with flushed, feverish cheeks, caught the sound of the low, soft tones, and though every fibre of his being thrilled responsively, and a voice loud as a trumpet seemed to cry and ring in his ears words of warning and reproof, he, remembering his vow, and the part Angela had so lately played in his discomfiture, lay back on his pillow, and hardened his heart against her.

He closed his eyes, but yet as he closed them, he had a vision, a momentary vision, dim, but, oh, so fair,

of a pale, sorrowful face, looking with a startled earnestness into the semi-darkness of the room, and the rushlight on the table faintly illuminated the white kerchief, and the bunch of red berries, which Angela held pressed against her heart. But the candle in Pauline's hand, who followed closely on Angela's steps, fell with no uncertain light on the outline of her head, and shining through the waving golden hair that surrounded it, gave to feverish eyes the impression of a halo of burnished rays, and when Pierre did close his eyelids, with that start of resolute pride which was ever the master of his actions, he saw reflected on the dark inner canvas of his mind, a pale white-robed figure standing in the doorway of his room, but the face was that of an angel.

Angela advanced into the room with a hesitating step and short quick gasps of breath, and Pauline noticed that she caught at the table as if giddy or faint; but recovering herself, she passed on towards the bed on which Pierre was lying.

"My friend," she said softly, as she stood beside it, and leaned forward, searching in the gloom of the darkened corner for the outline of his face, "my friend, I have come up a moment, with thy mother's leave, to say good-night."

There was no movement or response from Pierre, and in the silence which ensued one could hear only the quick breathing of the girl, as she waited for some answer.

"He sleeps, poor lad! after all his pain," she said softly, turning towards his mother. "When one is weak one falls into slumber so easily. I will not wake him to say 'good-night.'"

"He is not asleep," responded Pauline, with the

unpolished tartness of her nature rising in proportion to her vexation.

"He is angry, then," said Angela, "and does not wish to speak to me. Is that so, Pierre?" she added, in a low, constrained voice.

Not a muscle of Pierre's face moved; not a quiver of the eyelid betrayed the fiery anguish of the moment, only Angela noticed the hand on the counterpane clenched more firmly, and her ear caught the simulated sound of ease in the low-drawn breathing.

"Poor Pierre! it has been for him a long day of pain and trouble; no wonder he needs rest. Thou, therefore, dear Pauline, wilt wish him good-night for me, and say, to-morrow, perhaps——" she paused, "to-morrow, I shall hope to see him, and——" she paused again; Pierre had, unconsciously to himself, sighed a long-drawn sigh of weariness and pain.

Angela forgot to finish the sentence, for which Pauline was waiting passively, and, turning once more to the bed, she said in a low voice, full of an earnest purpose—

"Pierre, if it is anger against me keeps thee silent, let it pass from thy heart, and look at me! To-morrow, when I explain all, thou must perforce forgive me, unless, indeed, thou wilt forgive me now."

Pierre moved suddenly away as she bent over him, and hid his face upon his arm.

She waited a moment to see if he would speak, but finding him resolved to make no sign, she laid the bunch of crimson berries, which she had held up to this moment pressed closely against her side, upon the coverlid, and bending once more low enough that her words might reach his ears, she murmured in a voice inaudible save to him, some earnest phrase of entreaty

or remonstrance ; then, lifting up her face, she said, sorrowfully :

" Good-night, Pierre ! good-night, Pauline ! farewell, my dear, dear friends."

She moved towards the door as she spoke, looking back lingeringly a moment on the threshold, then she followed Pauline down the stairs, who, fastening her wraps about her, let her out into the chilly night air.

" Good-bye," she said, putting her cold hand into Pauline's. "*Thou* art not angry with me?" For Pauline's face was grave and set.

" No, I am not angry ; but your sympathy strikes me as rather one-sided. The worse the boy behaves, the more you pity him."

" Yes, that is just it. He that is whole needs not the physician, but he that is sick. Thou, dearest Pauline, art safe, while Pierre——"

" And thou lookest on thyself then as my Pierre's physician ?" interrupted Pauline with a doubtful laugh and an emphasis on the word " my."

" Oh," cried Angela, " how canst thou say such words ? There is but One who can heal his sickness. Pauline, wilt thou also misinterpret me, like all the rest ?"

" I do not misinterpret," replied Pauline, coldly. " I know the fact—thou lovest my son !"

Angela looked up once into Pauline's eyes, with an expression not easily to be forgotten by her who saw it, and replied in a low, constrained voice :

" Yes, in so far that to-night I could gladly die for him, if I might by that give him peace."

She shivered as she spoke ; and drawing her shawl more tightly around her shoulders, moved silently towards the gate.

"Take care of thyself, my child ; the ground is slippery," cried Pauline remorsefully, as she followed Angela's retreating figure with tear-clouded eyes down the garden path.

Angela opened the gate with evident difficulty, and closing it again, stepped out into the drifts of snow which encumbered both sides of the road. She did not look back or utter a word, until she had almost passed the angle of the garden road, when she suddenly stopped, and, gazing across the wall towards the house, exclaimed in a voice quivering with some great emotion, " Farewell, Pauline ! farewell, Pierre ! " then passed on into the night.

The window of Pierre's room was shut, yet in the stillness and silence of the snow-bound world, he caught the parting words, and the tone of abject sorrow in which they were uttered.

He sat up on his bed, and struggled feverishly to gain his feet. " Angela," he cried, " Angela, wait a moment. Mother, call her back. I would say a word, one word, to her before she goes."

" She is gone ; there is no use to seek to bring her back," replied Pauline, closing the door beneath, and drawing the bolt sharply across it. " When she was here, thou mightest have been a trifle more civil. She is ill, poor girl ! and looks like death itself."

" What ails her ? " cried Pierre, angrily.

" She has taken a violent chill standing in the snow outside, and the sooner she gains the warmth of her father's kitchen the better. She shivered down-stairs till it made my own teeth chatter in my head to look at her."

" Aye, it is ever thus. Those who will meddle and mix themselves up with such folk as she does, suffer

for it always. Why did she stand in the cold? What business was it of hers, except to thwart and vex me?"

As Pierre uttered these words, his eyes fell on the red berries which Angela had left on the coverlet, and which until now he had not observed. He snatched them up furiously, and, without pausing for a moment's reflection, flung them across the narrow room into the heart of the stove.

"What does she bring me such rubbish for?" he cried, angrily. "If her smooth words and her actions matched each other better, one might value her gifts."

"Where did those berries grow?" asked Pauline, curiously, "and why should she bring them to thee? Angela said thou wouldst know all about them."

"They grow on a tree above her mother's grave, and therefore, no doubt, she hopes by such a sacrifice to win my forgiveness, and," added Pierre, bitterly, "perhaps my soul's salvation. But does she ever think of *my* father's grave? That is the question. Her mother, she says, and firmly believes, is a blessed saint in heaven; but what of my father? Have I not read, have I not heard, has not Janette Chaudron sworn to me a thousand times, as the truth, that until Christine has forfeited her worthless life his spirit knows no rest, but writhes in torment in its grave, crying out to me, to you, mother, to rise up and give him peace?"

"Janette Chaudron doth lie, and thou art foolish to listen to her!" replied Pauline, shortly; and, rising up from the table where she had just seated herself, she left the room precipitately, for she would not have Pierre see the mortal anguish which his words had suddenly conjured up in her heart

CHAPTER XIII.

A FIGURE ON THE BALCONY.

ALL that evening little Paul lay in the arms of Marie Fedele. The paroxysm of fear had been violent in the extreme ; but, as the night closed in, it had begun to subside, and he sat on her knee now, not restlessly moving to and fro with cries of anguish, but, what seemed to her worse than all, gazing at her with eyes whose expression was to her unsearchable, and yet which seemed itself to search the very recesses of her soul.

"What does the poor lad desire? why does he gaze at me thus with such craving eyes?" she murmured to herself; "would that he could speak, and tell all that troubles him."

But even while she looked at him, Marie knew that no words could ever express the strange thoughts which oppressed and troubled his spirit. As she gazed into his eyes to-night, she realised more than she had ever before done, that he was what her husband had said, fear-stricken in his mind, "*aliéné*," as the French pathetically call those who are estranged and separated from the rest of their fellow-creatures by a ghastly blank, or a still more ghastly imagination.

But in Paul, how pure, how holy was this estrangement! He was separated, it is true, from the world by cruel sorrow, by death and desolation, and by bitter and godless persecution, but above all he was divided from it by a blameless life, a pure though stricken

mind, and a soul that knew no sin, inasmuch that God had made it from the first innocent of evil.

His mother had in his infancy taught him all that so youthful a mind could take in or comprehend of the God who lived above the sky, and of the Saviour so loving and pitiful to little children, but she had not troubled the depths of that tranquil mind with dark descriptions of sin and its fatal consequences ; nor, indeed, if she had tried to make Paul understand this sad side of futurity, could she have succeeded. He comprehended the mystery neither of sin nor of death. At night, ere she placed him in his little crib, which stood beside her own bed, she always made him kneel a moment on her lap, and listen with clasped hands and upturned eyes, while she uttered a short and simple prayer for God's blessing and Christ's merciful keeping during the coming night, accompanied by reverent thanks for His many and great mercies during the past day. Thus the mother relinquished her child into God's holy care for the night, and the child, following the motion of its mother's lips, sealed the compact of love and trust. "*À Dieu ! my child,*" she would say, stooping over the little cradle, and kissing her infant tenderly. "*À Dieu ! my treasure, à Dieu !*" But the child could say but "*À Dieu !*"—and to God his life was given.

When Paul's mother was taken from him ; when she lay, waiting with solemn, upward-lifted eyes, and would not move at his pitiful cries, or turn her head to look up on him, Paul wondered. You could see the wonder, and the pain, and the dawn of a great terror, in those big, wide open eyes. It was Marie Fedele who first saw the shadow fall, as it were, over the light of the young child's life ; it was she who snatched it from

its grandmother's arms, and carried it out into the sunny kitchen, where the fire was crackling, and the crickets were chirping, and where death seemed to have no place. She tried to make the child look at the bullfinch which was piping in the cage; she snatched bright blossoms from the flower-box in the open window. She covered her own pretty face with her white hands, and called out with a forced laugh, "Ha! Paul, where is Marie?" but it was all no use; the child, with fixed and ever darkening eyes, seemed looking into some great space beyond, till all at once, as if it had seen its mother pass out of sight into the far-off land, it burst out with the passionate wail, "À Dieu! À Dieu!" which cry it continued at sobbing intervals, till, exhausted with weeping, it sank into a deep sleep in Marie's arms.

And now once again the fierce waves of sorrow and trouble had thrown this poor outcast on Marie's breast; once again the child lay sobbing on her bosom, and the shadow of pain, which even then she had sought to chase from its eyes, was fixed there now, only deepened into a darkness more profound.

Marie would not allow any of her family to share her watch that night. She sent her children to bed, entreated her husband to follow their example, while, rising and drawing nearer the fire, she threw a warm shawl over the child.

"But had we not better decide now what we shall do with little Paul to-morrow?" said Sebastian, as he stooped over Marie's shoulder to gaze at the boy, before retiring to rest, and to wish his wife good-night. "The neighbours will surely discover his whereabouts, and, in their present state of excitement, there is no saying what they might not do. Also, hast thou

considered that possibly Christine may herself come seeking for him in the morning?"

"Is not Christine locked up at the Mairie?" asked Marie, quickly.

"Yes, that I can answer for; but there is a rumour to-night that, at the earnest request of Angela Biondina, Christine is to be liberated early to-morrow morning, which one can partly credit, seeing what a soft corner the Mayor has for the girl in his heart."

"Who gave thee this news?"

"I heard Antoine telling it a moment ago in the kitchen. He has been out all the evening, and has, I hear, been closeted for hours to-night with Pierre, whose rage over to-day's doings and the Mayor's interference knows no bounds. If Antoine has told him that little Paul is here, we shall be in a pack of troubles. What thinkest thou, Marie? for we must at all hazards secure the safety of the child."

"The child is asleep now," said Marie, lifting the corner of the shawl and looking for a moment at Paul's face, "and, whatever happens, we must not disturb or distress him until this fit of terror is gone by. Do thou therefore, Sebastian, lie down and rest awhile, and I will sit here and think what is best to be done. I do not believe that Antoine would betray us, and we must only trust in God, and leave the morrow in His hands."

"But thou wilt at least call me, Marie, if thou art frightened?"

"Yes, yes!"

Sebastian, somewhat unwillingly, left the kitchen, and Marie sat down to her lonely watch, having first blown out the candle, for a light shining through the cracks of the shutter might excite the curiosity of

those passing along the road outside and rouse their suspicion, and while the child was quiet Marie needed nothing but the fire-light: besides, if Paul were to wake and gaze at her again with that fathomless expression of his, which made her heart ache, she would not be able to see all its trouble, and she would have more strength to watch through the long night, and more courage to think and plan what must be done to-morrow for its future safety. And for this courage and wisdom, to think and to plan rightly, she prayed now earnestly in the silence of the night, listening watchfully through her prayers to the breathing of the child, for she knew enough of little Paul and his sufferings to be aware that this sleep might be only the prelude to one of those long fainting fits into which, after a paroxysm of terror, he was almost certain to fall.

For two hours all went well. The child slept quietly, neither moaning nor sighing, as it had done so monotonously all the earlier part of the evening; its breathing became every moment calmer and more regular, and Marie hoped earnestly that the night would pass over without fresh cause for anxiety.

And now, her mind being more at ease, she wandered off into reveries, reveries that, after the long strain and fatigue of the day, touched narrowly on the borderland of sleep, until presently she roused herself to listen; for how was this? The child's breathing in the last few moments had strangely altered; each laboured breath seemed now to stretch itself out to so fine a point that Marie, bending low over the cot in her newly-awakened anxiety, could not follow it to its end; and then, after a long pause of utter silence, it seemed to start up again with a catching sob, and stretch itself out once more into, as it seemed to

Marie, the very confines of death. She turned down the shawl which she had drawn over the child's head, and was horrified to see by the fire-light the ghastly pallor of its face. Its eyes, too, were no longer closed, but gazing upwards with that terrible, earnest glance at nothing, which makes the heart of lookers-on to fail with fear, "because that man goeth to his long home," where no mortal love can follow.

Once again, as under the sweet-scented walnut-trees beside the river, Marie pressed her lips on the child's brow, and once again she cried out in her distress, "He is dead!" She sprang up from her seat near the fire, and moved on as quickly as her burden would permit to the cottage window. But the moon, shining with its cold and bluish light, only made the child's face appear more death-like and horrible. Marie, terrified and bewildered, knew not what next to do. To remain all night with the dead child in her arms was more than what she had strength of mind for; for, though brave with the courage of love, and with heart entirely free from the superstitions of her class, yet she could not watch and see the child expire in her arms. It was a pain which she could not endure all alone and unsupported.

Ah! if Christine were to see the face of little Paul now, with what anxiety the sight would fill her! and Marie remembered with a strange vividness the sunny day years ago spent in the foresters' field with her husband; where she, as a bride, looking over the garden hedge, had seen this "were-wolf," as they ever called her, passionately clasp the child to her breast, and then, in the anguish of some sudden recollection, tear her grey hair from her head, while she cast herself down upon the grass in a paroxysm of grief.

Ah! they were cruel indeed who would add fresh sorrows to a heart scarred by such fearful wounds, and Marie shuddered nervously as she thought of the ice-covered lake in which only that morning the wretched Christine had been plunged.

She was, however, startled from these thoughts by a sound which seemed to her like the swing of the wooden gate outside, which always creaked on its rusty hinges, and, starting up once more, she looked hastily down into the narrow strip of ground, which separated her *châlet* from the road. But, even had some one that moment entered by the gate, a clump of thick-growing raspberry bushes, their branches laden with snow, must have hidden the intruder from her sight. She watched a few seconds longer, but once more catching sight of the fixed eyes of the child, she determined she would delay no longer, but place the little Paul in the cradle in the corner of the kitchen, and go and call her husband! he was wise, and tender, and suggestive, and he would, by a few words, restore her failing courage, and see if any one was lurking beneath in the garden.

She accordingly laid down little Paul in the household cot, close by the stove, from which there issued now a ruddy glow, and she was hastily turning out of the room into the stone corridor beyond, when she heard a low, long-drawn moan or wail of sorrow, somewhere, as it seemed to her, in the garden beneath.

Marie paused, while a cold shudder shook her from head to foot. It was clear that some stranger had entered their place from the road outside, and she shrank back with a sudden unreasoning fear, and withdrew a step or so into the kitchen. Was it possible that Antoine had already betrayed them, and

that some one was feigning distress in the garden outside, so as to induce her to open their door? For a few seconds the sound was not repeated, but as the clock in the church steeple chimed twelve, she heard the same low cry again ; a cry so full of anguish and trouble, that Marie, with the same courage which pity ever inspired in her breast, advanced towards the door, and, drawing back the heavy bolt and chain which barred all entrance, she stepped out on the balcony which, as is usual in the Swiss *châlets*, led, by a long flight of rusty-coloured wooden steps down into the yard below, and where she could see if any figure were visible in the garden.

It was a strange, weird night to look out upon, for instead of darkness and gloom there was a blinding white light, which made the road beyond look like a silvery stream, while the garden walks immediately beneath the balcony, bright with the frosted snow, shone here and there as if sprinkled over with diamonds. The leaves, too, of the whitened evergreens which bordered the little pleasure-ground, caught this electric brilliancy, and the only place where darkness lurked was in the shadows which, from the very contrast around them, showed even blacker and more impenetrable than ever.

Marie made a movement forward on the balcony, throwing, as she did so, her apron across her chest, for the piercing wind came down with cutting fierceness from the snowy mountains opposite. Here she hesitated, uncertain whether to remain in the safety of her present position, where one step would bring her back into the security of her home, or descend into the garden beneath, where the figure had evidently concealed itself.

"Who is there?" she cried, bending over the gallery, and speaking in a voice purposely modulated so as not to be heard by those within the house. "Speak, whoever thou art, and tell me thy trouble;" but receiving no answer, she continued, as if addressing herself, "Surely I do hear some one weeping beneath in the garden."

Marie, trembling and hesitating, drew her apron still tighter around her, and prepared to descend, but was arrested by a curious muffled sound, coming this time from the house itself. It was, perhaps, only a sliding mass of ice-bound snow gliding from one high stone on the chalet to another, or it might have been the creaking of the wooden rafters, strained as they were by the iron bands of the black and bitter frost, but the noise came from the corner of the chalet where Antoine slept, and Marie felt intuitively that some great danger was close at hand, and that the safety of those she loved depended on her courage and caution.

She glided softly from the head of the steps to the further end of the wooden gallery which ran along the front of the dwelling, and then, raising herself on her tiptoes, she gazed upwards at the small square hole which, cut in the wall of the chalet and glazed with thick green glass, served Antoine for a window, but there was nothing there to arouse her suspicions. The rounded mounds of the glass caught the glimmer of the snow, and glistened themselves in a strange fantastic manner. Marie waited and listened, and would fain have satisfied herself further, for if she ventured now to re-enter the chalet and seek Antoine in his room, she might find him feigning a sleep which she durst not question, and if the sleep chanced to be real, it would be worse than madness to rouse him.



"SHE SAW STANDING ON THE TOPMOST STEPS OF THE GALLERY STAIRCASE A FIGURE" (p. 173).

Marie felt and knew that she had that evening taken a step dangerous in the extreme, a step which might bring the anger and vengeance of the whole town upon her and her household; and if she now ventured to descend into the garden, what fresh trouble to herself and her home might she not be incurring? She turned from her upward gaze at the chalet eaves and looked across in a sort of momentary stupor of indecision at the great white peaks opposite, rising out of the dark and sombre pine forests, when all at once there was a creaking sound on the staircase, and as she turned with a low cry of fear, she saw standing on the topmost steps of the gallery staircase a figure which, enveloped in a long black cloak, stood out hideously against the background of the hills which surrounded the village.

"Oh!" cried Marie, terrified out of all sense of concealment. "Who are you, and for what are you standing there? Speak, speak, for the love of Heaven!"

The figure thus adjured mounted the last steps of the long wooden flight, and advanced nearer to Marie. She thought even for a second, from its strange and wild movements, that it was about to precipitate itself upon her, or perhaps, in a moment of rabid frenzy, to fling her over the balcony; but instead, as if suddenly conscious of Marie's blanched face of horror, the figure raised a warning hand, and as Marie's lips opened to utter another cry of fear, it sank into a heap at her feet, and in a voice which Marie instantly recognised as that of Christine, poured forth in low, broken words, which in her terror Marie could scarcely comprehend, a whole burden of thanksgiving and gratitude, interspersed with hoarse questions and low, choking sobs

while she clutched at the hem of her skirt, and covered it with kisses.

Even in this supreme moment of terror and amazement Marie was conscious that the window in Antoine's room was once more being unbolted. She heard the iron catch which fastened it drawn back, and the sharp creak of the warped wood as it was forced to yield to the pressure of the hand within.

Marie's quick instinct took in at a glance the danger of her present position, and the certainty that Antoine would overhear every word she uttered if they remained longer on the balcony, and this fear drove her on to take a step which she might otherwise have shrunk from putting in practice.

"Good friend," she said, stooping low, and putting her hand into the wrinkled palm of the reputed witch, who still crouched moaning at her feet, "rise up quickly and step inside the door of my house. The little Paul is in my kitchen ; you will find him in the cradle by the side of the stove. I fear me he is very ill, but of that thou canst best judge for thyself, only do not delay. Pass quickly on through yon open door, and I will keep watch here, so that none may ascend or descend to interfere with thy safety."

The figure rose up at these words, and for one moment Marie was conscious that her face was being subjected to an eager scrutiny, but a glance at the guileless eyes, full of a tender woman's pity, was enough ; and like a dark shadow Christine glided into the châlet.

CHAPTER XIV.

"IT IS WELL."

"PIERRE, hist!" cried Antoine Fedele, in a low hoarse voice, as he stood, in the early dawn of the next morning, under one of the principal windows of Pauline Milano's chalet. "Hist! wake up, my friend, I have somewhat to tell thee." And in order to arouse more fully the attention of the person within, Antoine, mounting a few steps of the gallery, threw some small pebbles against the closed jalousies of the room above. He had not long to wait. Pierre was in no mood for sleeping. The pain from his wound had kept him awake almost all night, and the only sleep he had came in snatches, when fearful dreams had made the respite from suffering almost a greater misery.

Now he was glad, stiff and tired as he was, to rise and let in a rush of cold, clear air. It would be refreshing to see the mountains and the woods and the houses, and the every-day tokens of human life, and to shake off the phantom horrors of a feverish brain.

"What is it, Antoine?" he said, leaning his elbows on the window-sill, and running his fingers up through his bed-becrumped hair. "I thought nought would move thee, great lazy loon, out of thy warm blankets at this hour of the morning. What has happened, eh?" he added more curiously, as he noted the eager face of the boy beneath.

"I have dreadful news to tell thee; Angela Bion-

dino is dead," cried Antoine, in a hoarse whisper, which seemed to thrill through the very air beneath, and to rise up in quivering circles towards the sky.

"What! Angela dead? Impossible! She was sitting here, with my mother, only yesterday evening. It cannot be true; it is impossible. Thou art mocking me," and Pierre, with white lips and terror-smitten eyes, gazed down upon the speaker beneath.

"I am not mocking thee; it is quite true," replied Antoine. "Her father was up, half-crazed, at our house, craving help nigh two hours ago; but there was never yet a cure found for death," added he with a dull, distressful sob. "Father and mother both went back with the poor man to the inn, but it was all no good—the girl had been dead for many hours, for she was quite cold and stiff."

"What ailed her that she should die?" asked Pierre, in a strange thick voice, still touched with a shade of contemptuous unbelief. "What illness could carry one off so fast?"

"Aye, that is the question they are all discussing down at the inn. It appears that after she returned home somewhat late last night, she complained much of cold. She had been down to the Mayor's house."

"To the Mayor's house! What for?" asked Pierre, with a sudden start of pain.

"They say it was some question about releasing Christine, which took her there; and he, seeing her so white and trembling, had walked home with her, and insisted that she should allow the *chef* to prepare her a drink of warm mulled wine. She drank it, however, much against her will, saying that she believed it was a spiced drink that the *chef* had prepared for her earlier in the afternoon, which had made her feel so

sick to death : then bidding good night to the Mayor, and to her father, she excused herself on the plea of fatigue, and went up to her bed. They knew no more until the servant went to call her for the early diligence, and found her lying there dead and cold."

"Why should they rouse the girl at such an hour? It is infamous," cried Pierre, round whose heart, at every word of Antoine's, an iron band of anguish was tightening with a remorseless grasp.

"It would be well if they could have roused her, poor child," sobbed Antoine, no longer able to repress his grief. "She would insist always on rising early on a Friday, to serve the guests who arrive by the early post. For the old chef is grown so blind, he cannot see by candle-light, and Angela for a long time past helped him in the kitchen. Biondino is like a wild animal with rage and grief. He declares—" here Antoine paused, and shuffled his feet on the gravel.

"He declares what?" questioned Pierre, leaning out of the window, so as to catch the reply.

"He declares that Christine, and no one else, is answerable for the death of his daughter."

"Christine! and for what reason?"

"He has reason to say it, and he would have better still if he knew all I know," replied Antoine, somewhat doggedly; "at any rate, be that as it may, when he went down to his yard this morning, he found five of his best fowls dead also, lying, blasted as it were, on their sides, and also Lalagé, their old and favourite goat, stone-dead on the kitchen floor. It appears," added Antoine, cautiously looking around him as he spoke, "that Biondino boasted only last night at supper that he had that afternoon with his own hands tied Christine Delemont's feet together at

the 'Lac des Sapines,' and afterwards helped to souse her three times in the ice-hole beyond, and more than one pair of eyes saw Christine prowling last night about the town. She was seen entering the yard of the hotel about midnight, and no one noticed her passing out again. At any rate, they all say that she has left her mark upon that house, and I confess myself that this time matters look dead against her, whatever one may feel to the contrary," said Antoine, with a decisive nod of the head.

"Do you yourself know for certain, Antoine, that Christine was last night seen in the town, and did you see her?" asked Pierre, bending down and looking Antoine full in the face. "You remember your promise?"

"Aye, I remember it well, but I will not give you an answer till I can see you face to face, and can speak to you without fear of other ears overhearing our conversation. Also I must have a promise from you of secrecy, for I have no wish to harm Christine if she is innocent, and if she is guilty I do not care to have her revenging herself upon me. She has shown now what she can do, and I, for one, have no desire to bring her anger down on my head; besides——"

"Besides!" repeated Pierre, contemptuously. "I know the meaning of that cowardly word, 'besides.' You are afraid of your stepmother. You dare not take one step that she has not measured out for you. You are as much tied to her apron-strings as the veriest infant. I despise thee, Antoine," he added, returning to the more unconventional "thee." "I thought we had agreed last night that thou wast to shake off this bondage, as I have done, and be a free man."

"Well, well, let it be ; but only to think that poor Angela was alive and well last night, and this morning she is dead," said Antoine, with apparent irrelevancy, his eyes running over with tears.

"Confusion ! do you need to remind me of that ?" ejaculated Pierre, as he drew in his head precipitately and closed the jealousies with a snap, and though Antoine waited for some minutes longer, beneath the projecting sill, not a sound came from the chamber above, nor did Pierre return to hold any further conversation with his friend.

When Pierre heard Antoine's steps retreating down the garden path, and when through the jealousies he saw his slender figure pass out through the gate and move slowly down the street, he turned with a deep groan and threw himself heavily on his bed. Up till now he had kept up a brave appearance, and had listened to Antoine's news with no further flinching of the face than was natural when one learned for the first time that the flower of the whole village had been struck down in one night by the cruel hand of death ; but now in the silence and safety of his own room, he must yield to the fierce grief which Antoine's intelligence had kindled in his bosom. Angela Biondino, his little Angela, was dead. If he were to lift the whole world on his shoulders and fling it after his enemy, as he felt the strength at this moment to do, he could not bring her back. Only last evening she had stood by his bed ; she had bent over him, and he had felt her warm breath on his cheek. Could he bear to remember this ? The thought of it was agony. If he dwelt on it he should go mad. Why had he not rushed after her last night, ill as he was, and passionately cried for her forgive-

ness? If he had wept tears of blood it would have been too small a price to have parted from her in love and goodwill. Now, to the last day of his most miserable life, he would never hear her voice again; never see the smile which had been pure and priceless to him as the thrice-refined silver. It was not true. She was not dead. He would go down and see all for himself. He would cry into her ears his sorrow and his love until she must hear him. He started up in his bed with haggard face and flung his arms up into the air with a gesture of pitiable abject despair. As he did so, something rolled from the coverlid of his bed, and fell upon the floor. His eye followed it, at first listlessly, but afterwards with a breathless suspense. In another moment he had leaped from his bed, and snatched it eagerly from the ground. It was one of the red berries which Angela had timidly offered to him only the night before, and which gift he had voluntarily cast from him and despised. Oh, more precious than any jewel was this trivial relic of her pure compassionate love.

Then again arose the wild cry in his head, "She is not dead! it is impossible!" She could not have died and passed away so utterly, and he lie there unconscious of so terrible a sundering of body and spirit. He must go forth and see and hear it for himself.

Pierre leaped up hurriedly and looked about him, with vague and restless eyes, for his daily attire; but he was so weak, that when he made the effort to put on his clothes he was forced to rest every few moments, his head swimming round and his heart failing him with a deadly faintness, behind which there brooded as deadly a despair.

When his dressing was completed he went out by the gallery door, and slowly, and with great pain, descended the wooden stairs on which only yesterday he had fallen, and had had so narrow an escape for his life. Ah! would he had died then! he cried bitterly to himself. Then the morning could not have dawned for him which was to rob him of all love and peace and joy. He dreaded more than all that his mother might awake and hear him quitting the chalet. A question, a rebuke, a symptom even of a reproach, would be the goad to drive him to some instant act of madness, and before he yielded to any such fatal impulse he must see Angela for himself and know that she was dead.

He walked down to the garden gate, and, with a sudden gesture of command, silenced the faithful dog, who would have noisily greeted his master. On the snow outside, just opposite the gate, there was a stain of blood. It was the spot where the little Paul had fallen yesterday, but Pierre turned swiftly from its contemplation. In such thoughts lay the very seeds of swift and dangerous madness.

He passed down the village street, white and stern. He looked no man or woman in the face, not even the little children, who, knowing of his accident, but innocent of the grief at his heart, looked at him with undisguised interest and surprise.

He walked forward with eyes steadily fixed on the path before him, hoping until at least he reached the inn to shut out all sights, to avoid any recognition which might bring the dreaded conviction home to his heart.

But he could not but observe the unexpressed sympathy of some who allowed him to go by

unnoticed. Those whose approach he did not recognise, and whose greetings he shrank from, permitted him to pass on unchallenged, some even moving into the roadway to allow him to go by.

And, again, at this hour of the morning, when generally the little village was half asleep, he could not but notice the unusual stir, the groups of people gathered in knots on the roadside or in front of their *châlets*, and he observed how they all ceased their excited questions and answers as he went by, their voices sinking to a murmur of sudden pity, or a silence even more expressive.

Pierre was forced presently to look up, for there was a passion of grief rising in his breast that, unless he raised his head and drew one long breath of the pure morning air, must burst forth in instant tears, and make him the centre of all eyes in the neighbourhood.

He saw now, as he lifted up his eyes and looked through their quivering mists down the long perspective of the village street, a dense crowd gathered round the inn, his Angela's home, and at this sight hope died suddenly in his heart. The very earth on which he walked seemed to reel, the heavens grew black, the snow around was flecked with sparks of living fire, a deadly faintness was upon him, he gazed round helplessly, not knowing what he sought, with eyes full of a speechless trouble.

"Here, good friend, take my arm," cried a friendly voice close beside him; "we are both going the same road, and, after thy bad fall yesterday, thou needest something stronger than thy own legs to support thee."

Pierre grasped at the proffered aid, and through

the dimness and darkness he recognised the round face and burly form of Gartmann the blacksmith. He was grateful for the arm which saved him from falling to the ground, and whose support he could safely rely on, and yet with the sight of the well-known features came a fresh hurricane of black and bitter thoughts sweeping across his mind, thoughts impossible to stop now and disentangle, but which seemed to plunge his soul into deeper depths of anguish.

"You are going to the inn, of course, like all the rest of us," said Gartmann, in a strange, everyday tone. "No one will believe that the girl is dead, unless they see it with their own eyes. Even I, myself, keep on hoping, like an old fool, as I walk along, that it is only a trance, and that by-and-by she will open her eyes and astonish them all."

Pierre did not reply, though at the suggestion a momentary thrill of hope seemed to leap from the ashes of his grief, only to expire again with as sudden a quenching.

"My wife has seen her already, and says the child is as dead as a stone ; no mistake about it," and Gartmann kicked a lump of frozen snow out of the pathway with his broad, clumsily-fashioned boot, "but Lisa is always one for magnifying, and making things out worse than they are ; I wonder if they have bled her in the arm, now, or tried to bring her back to life by reasonable means, and not sat down, content to believe it all the work of that unfortunate, miserable woman."

"What woman ?" asked Pierre, in a hoarse voice.

"Why, Christine of course. Is not every tongue in the place wagging against her and her doings ? It all looks suspicious enough, I must confess—that is, if

all they say is true! But, bah! who speaks the truth now-a-days?" And Gartmann, pushing his way energetically through the crowd gathered in the neighbourhood of the inn, dragged Pierre relentlessly after him. At first some grumbled at his roughness, but a path was immediately made for them by those who recognised the lad, and who saw in the deathly paleness of his face the anguish of his heart.

A few more steps brought them to the side door. People were filing down the wooden staircase as they entered, with the expression in their eyes of those who have just looked on death. Pierre recognised it with a curious feeling of numbness of heart, which had suddenly come over him, and which enabled him to mount the stairs like all the others, and to approach the chamber where Angela lay.

A sob in a room somewhere close by startled him and caused a momentary hesitation, but Gartmann had him still by the arm, and led him on.

"This must be the room. The third door to the left, they said downstairs." The door opened as he spoke and the village doctor walked out alone. He had also the same expression in his eyes as all the others that had passed, and involuntarily, as he met Pierre's gaze, he shook his head hopelessly.

Gartmann knocked with a rough politeness on the wooden panel of the open door, and Pierre wondered, with a strange inconsistency of reasoning, that Angela herself did not reply, and bid them enter; but, instead, it was a man's voice which answered, and which said in a low, constrained tone, "Come in, my friend."

Gartmann walked forward into the middle of the room, and Pierre followed.

Behind the door there stood a bed, a low bed,

draped in snowiest white. Pierre, at least, did not venture to look at it, though he heard Gartmann groan as, less interested and heart-sore, he turned to satisfy himself that there was no mistake.

The face and figure which arrested Pierre's attention, and gave him the time necessary to make the effort over himself, were those not of a girl, but of a man. He was seated at the foot of this white, low couch, with his arms folded on the rails, and his head resting on his hands. His eyes were fixed in one long, dumb stare of pain at whatever lay upon that bed, and it was revealed to Pierre in that moment how much old Biondino, with all his roughness, had loved his daughter.

"Ah, the dear, lovely maiden!" groaned Gartmann, sympathetically. "She is, indeed, dead, quite dead—quite cold." He was evidently looking at Angela now, and Pierre, still gazing at Biondino's face, was aware by a sudden darkening spasm of his features, that Gartmann leaning over the bed had ascertained this latter fact by touch as well as by sight.

He turned instinctively and saw, before he was even aware that he had looked, the rough black hand of the blacksmith in lightest contact with another hand, white—aye, white with the very whiteness of death, and whose fingers, folded in a calm unearthly stillness, were closed over a bunch of crimson berries.

Gartmann drew back from the bed with a sob, and hurried out of the room, leaving Pierre alone by the side of his lost love.

Just one cry escaped his heart at the first sight of her sweet, dead face, a moan of deepest anguish, and then followed a silence, breathless almost as her own.

How long he looked upon her he did not know—

till he grew to feel that he was dead himself—mind, heart, and body, yet stupidly rooted to the floor, incapable of motion.

At last this helpless spell of misery was interrupted by a stir at the foot of the bed. The innkeeper had risen and was approaching him, and in another moment a strong arm was thrown round his neck and a broken voice said in his ear—

“Pierre, lad, how are we to bear this? If we look at her for ever she will never move, nor smile, nor speak to us again. Was there ever one like her in this world, I wonder? so fair, so pure! We none of us loved her half enough, did we? And we can never do anything to please her again.” He spoke all this inconsequently, gazing at Angela with dry, tearless eyes, but with such struggling agony in his voice that Pierre durst not attempt a reply.

“You loved her, too, my poor boy. I know it well, though you never said a word. I didn’t care about it then, but now she is gone it cannot harm her to speak of it. I know well I never could have refused her anything that would have made her happy—eh?” he asked, huskily, as Pierre involuntarily started and winced. “I never thwarted or vexed her in all my life, did I, lad?”

Pierre shook his head, but not a sound passed through his white, dry lips. Would to heaven he could record the same conscience void of self-reproach!

“I have something here put away for thee,” said Biondino, “a little keepsake. It was round her neck when she died, poor child, and it is very precious, therefore; but it belongs of right to thee.”

As he spoke, he drew from his pocket a small

heart, carved roughly from a peach-stone, which he placed in Pierre's extended palm. "I would have buried it with her," he said, sadly, "but I thought to look on it now and then would be of use to thee, lad. It might help thee, for to think of her we must all needs think from this time out of heaven."

Pierre closed his hand on the hard peach-stone, the very stone which he had carved for her himself more than a year ago, and tried to meet the earnest gaze of those sorrowful eyes; but he felt like a criminal standing condemned before his judge. Biondino continued—

"I know as little of heaven as thou dost, perhaps less; but I shall hope to think of it now, for where thy treasure is, lad, there will thy heart be also; at least, so she said. And all I ever loved are already there—her mother, and herself, and the little one, poor Marie, with the yellow hair, who died the first of all, and who, Angela would have it, was always close beside her, night and day, keeping her from evil, and leading her to good. Hist!" cried the innkeeper, loosening his arm suddenly from Pierre's neck, and straightening himself up, "is not that the Mayor's voice below in the kitchen? I hear he is beside himself, and I must go down and meet him. Thou—thou wilt follow when—when thou hast said adieu. Thou mayest say adieu," he said, tenderly, "even as I would, or her mother, were she here; but hearken: if that it might perhaps ease her soul, thou wilt also add a word—only one word—a cry it might be—even a thought, for help, for pardon, for peace. She loved thee, Pierre," he added, as he turned towards the door, "and to give thee this peace was her heart's desire."

As Marco Biondino closed the door after him,

Pierre fell like a stone on his knees beside the bed. Whether he prayed, whether he cried, or even strove to make his thoughts pierce through the great darkness around him to the gates of heaven, who could tell? He could not tell himself. He groaned aloud in his pain, that was all; and perhaps, in a dim, uncertain way, it was a groan of remorseful prayer directed towards a distant heaven; but, oh! how far off seemed that peace for which Angela had so earnestly prayed!

To look at her face, so still, so calm, so dead, was a madness which admitted of no peaceful reflection. To see the smile on her parted lips, while his heart was riven with anguish, was a contrast too terrible to admit just now soothing thoughts of heaven or future dreams of pure celestial bliss.

There were steps now ascending the stairs, and Pierre knew he had but a moment left to say farewell for ever to her he knelt beside, his Angela. Yes; her father had said she might, perhaps, have been one day his. It was a cold and cruel comfort, nevertheless from this day out in his heart he could call her *his*; yes, in his poor broken heart.

"Good-bye!" he said, softly; "good-bye, Angela!" First he lifted the pale hand and reverently touched it with his lips, then folded it over the other, not disturbing the crimson berries beneath. Then he stood up, giddy and faint from kneeling, and bent over the calm, sweet face. "He gave me leave—your father," he murmured. "Good-bye, my dearest love! good-bye! and I swear to thee, Angela, I swear——" Hush! the Mayor was already at the door, and the oath, whether for good or evil, was left unregistered. Just one touch of his burning lips on that ice-cold

forehead, a first and last kiss snatched almost guiltily, and he turned away, passing the Mayor at the door with sightless eyes full of a dumb agony.

And Pierre, anxious to avoid the gaping crowd assembled in front of the house, passed out quickly through the garden door of the chalet.

But he had walked on for a few paces only, and was making for the path across the yard towards the hill beyond, when, almost before he was aware of their vicinity, his course was arrested by a knot of people gathered immediately in front of him.

"Pierre Milano!" cried a harsh, cracked voice, pitched in its highest key, "thou art the very one I was seeking for. Come hither and see for thyself. Not only is the girl in the house yonder struck dead, but that vile woman must needs wreak her vengeance on poor dumb animals also who never harmed her."

Pierre would have passed on, feeling incapable of facing a new excitement full of a disturbing peril to his present frame of mind, but the crowd had separated at Janette Chaudron's words, and in their midst Pierre recognised lying on its side, stark and stiff, Biondino's favourite goat Lalagé, while a few steps further off, on a bank of snow, a heap of feathered animals, turkeys and fowl, were also lying dead, with stiffened claws and rigid limbs.

Pierre gazed stupidly at them for a few minutes, but asked no questions. He saw only, wherever he looked, that calm face on the pillow within, with the smile of perfect peace upon its lips, and he shrank from the harsh voices and the violent execrations of those who surrounded him.

"He looks as if he had got his death-blow, poor lad," cried Lisa Gartmann, as Pierre moved away

silently from their midst ; " he has the colour of one who has been plague-smitten. I suppose he will be the next victim."

" Not he ! " shrieked Janette ; " he has the stuff in him of ten men. He is stunned now, but wait awhile till he awakes, and then—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, blood for blood ; nothing else will satisfy him, and he shall have it ! "

Pierre had sat down on a log of fallen pine-wood at a considerable distance from the farmyard, and out of sight of the crowd. He felt too faint to walk farther, and there were thoughts (nay, it seemed to him actual voices) speaking within him and crying out to be heard ; words uttered only last night by Angela, and which were coming back upon him like living words of fire :

" To-morrow, Pierre, thou must perforce forgive me," and again that last whisper of love and blessing murmured in his ear as if she had foreseen how sorely he would need present help and consolation. " Farewell, Pierre, my dear friend ; may God bless thee and Christ comfort thee. I am too weak to help thee, but cast thy burden on the Lord, and He will give thee rest." He could hear still the little gasps of pain uttered between each loving word, and he could read their meaning now.

Pierre sobbed aloud. Yes, for her sake he would try and believe it all. For her sake what would he not believe, what would he not do and dare and suffer ? and once again he lifted his sorrowful eyes to the far-off skies, for, to hold communion with *his* Angela, he felt he must look up.

CHAPTER XV.

AT THE GATE.

THE excitement which reigned in the little town of Protogno, after all the circumstances of Angela's death became known, had never had a parallel in its village history. Even the effect produced by Silvestro Milano's death, some years before, paled in its intensity when viewed side by side with this last fiendish act of malice and witchcraft.

For such the people would have it to be. No other suggestion was for a moment tolerated or listened to, and the name of Christine was bandied about from mouth to mouth with every vile and abominable epithet attached to it.

Certain cruel facts could not be denied, and were undeniably in favour of the supposition that Angela had come to her death by other than natural causes. Even the most lenient, those who had loved and trusted Christine—and of these there were but two or three now in the whole village—could not find a sufficient cause for so sad and lamentable a death; nor dared they even inquire into the circumstances, for the fury of the people was so great that any one suspected even of showing a leaning to Christine, or venturing to doubt her agency in the matter, would have surely suffered at their hands.

The Mayor of the town himself took up the matter, and that with a bitterness and zeal which he had

never been known to display before on any occasion. He was naturally a good-tempered man, and indulgent, generous and forgiving, but this occurrence was not within the pale of ordinary crimes, and Angela Biondino was to him no ordinary being.

He had admired her as a little child, racing about her father's inn, with zealous haste running on all the errands of the household, with streaming golden hair and bright unclouded eyes. Later on he had noticed, since her sister's death, the grave beauty which had taken the place of her former gay *insouciance*, and, within the last few months, he had come to think that the world did not hold another girl equal to Angela Biondino for beauty and goodness, and that to have her for one's wife would be the purest happiness that the earth could give him.

Now in one moment all his hopes had been frustrated, and his future made empty and desolate; and it seemed to him as he stood beside Angela's bed, and witnessed the frantic grief of her father, and the face of the dead girl with her fingers clasped so delicately on her motionless bosom, when he remembered her pure and lovely life, and looked at the white lips and the closed eyes which had pleaded with him so eloquently only the night before for Christine's release, it seemed to him then as if no amount of future punishment or retribution would be heavy enough to atone for a crime so heinous and unnatural. And thus it came to pass that, raising his eyes to the rafters above Angela's bed, this usually kind-hearted and forgiving man swore a deep and passionate oath that no mercy should henceforth be extended to the vile wretch and heathen woman, Christine Delemont, and that he himself would put forth all the power of his position to

insure her detection and bring her to the death which she had so long and richly deserved.

Accordingly, the night before Angela's funeral, placards were written and posted all over the town, signed in the name of Monsieur de Pressyne, the Mayor, offering a reward of thirty gold pieces for the apprehension of Angela's reputed murderess, and forbidding on pain of death that any one in the village or commune should harbour her, or in any way seek to protect her from the just consequences of her crime. To these placards the Mayor affixed his seal, and those who saw his face on the morning of poor Angela's funeral knew that he was resolved to exact, aye, to the last stretch of his power, the vengeance which alone could allay the cruel pain at his heart, and the fuming anger which filled his bosom.

It was almost a summer's day this Sunday, coming in the heart of winter, on which they buried Angela Biondino, "the white lily of their town," as the Mayor had called her when he addressed the people from the steps of the Mayor's residence, and pressed upon them the necessity of laying aside fear, and setting themselves diligently to discover the retreat in which Christine had so long enjoyed immunity. Angela's coffin was carried by the young men of the town to the little churchyard on the hill, amongst the rocks and pines, and Pierre was there to share in their last labour of love, though those who saw his ashen face, and noticed his noiseless steps, wondered he had the strength to make such a grievous effort.

Almost every individual in the town followed the funeral procession: all the girls of the village, dressed in white, walked slowly behind the coffin, and the tears shed that day, and the loud cries and wails of sorrow,

as they bore poor Angela to her grave, were truthful tributes to the pure life and endearing qualities of her who had been so suddenly cut off from them.

They carried the coffin first into the little church, where a place had been prepared for it, in front of the altar, and around it the nearest mourners gathered, while some prayers were uttered, and a simple hymn sung, amidst tears and sobs.

It was while standing amongst this group, with pallid face and dry tearless eyes, that Pierre suddenly realised, with a pang too keen almost for endurance, that this was *the* Sunday, the day on which he had so confidently resolved that he should accompany poor Angela to church, and had dreamed of the happiness he should bring to her eyes, and the smile to her lips. Now, indeed, he stood by her side in the church, but her face was hidden away from him, and no art of his could ever bring a ray of happiness to her eyes, or a smile of hope to her lips.

He turned, and leaning his elbow against the roughly-hewn pillar behind him, pressed his face down against his arm, to stifle the groan of anguish which he could no longer repress; nor did he raise his head until, the hymn being over, they prepared to leave the church, and he was again called upon to take his place in the procession.

They buried Angela side by side with her mother, and in the same grave with her little sister. The snowdrops which Angela's own hands had planted on little Marie's and her mother's grave, were many of them crushed beneath the feet of those who pressed around the spot, for in lifting the earth from the smaller mound many had become uprooted and scattered here and there.

As the crowd broke up and moved away in sorrowful groups of twos and threes, to their homes in the village, Pierre also moved out through the little gate, but he did not follow in the wake of the others. He turned off instead into the pine and chestnut wood which bordered the churchyard on one side, and, climbing the steep hillside for a little space, he sat down on a long grey rock, remote from every habitation, to cry out undisturbed the anguish of his heart, and to hide the bitter remorseful tears which must be shed ere he could return to say adieu to his Angela, and plant again those snowdrops on her grave which it would have filled his heart with pain to see bruised and rudely scattered about the earth.

He waited there till the short winter's day had almost run its course, and then took his way slowly down the rocks, towards the little side gate of the churchyard.

But when he reached it, it was locked ; and looking through the bars, he could see that some considerate hand had already smoothed the turf around the newly made grave, and replanted the pale tufts of snowdrops. Even that last office of love was denied to him. Her father, of course, had tarried behind, to leave things as they should be, or Marie, but what did it signify who had done it, when he had had no hand or part in it ?

He went round to the main entrance of the church, but that was locked also, and the old verger was always absent at this hour, attending to his cattle in the wooden shed in the valley.

Pierre lingered there long, looking steadfastly before him, till the clock struck four from the church

tower, then lifting up his eyes, he saw how the shadows of evening were beginning to fall on all around him, and only on the white peak standing up high against the blue sky was there a lingering touch of sunlight.

Why had that distant mountain always brought Angela to his mind? and why this evening more than ever did it bring her very spirit, as it were, before his eyes? Was it the crown of gold and the pure white raiment rising out of the surrounding gloom, or the faint stars beginning to shine in the heavens beyond that far-off hill, or the heaven itself where Angela was—his Angela? With a shudder Pierre realised what a great gulf of darkness lay between him and that pure land beyond. As he looked up again the sun had gone down, the crown had paled, the snow had turned to a cold and ashen grey; hope at the same moment seemed to die suddenly out of his heart, and a great darkness to fall upon his spirit.

Pierre raised himself from the pillar of the gate against which he had been leaning, and prepared to descend the hill, but as he moved a step backward into the road, his eyes fell upon a large white placard attached to the very post in front of him, and catching sight at the instant of a hateful name printed on its surface in larger letters than the others, his eyes greedily devoured the rest, till all the black poison of its contents had entered into his soul.

A thrill of something closely allied to hatred shook him from head to foot, and when he lifted his eyes from the perusal of the placard, they were full of an ominous gloom; his teeth were set, his hands clenched, and a purple flush had covered his pallid careworn face.

"If I have to descend into hell to find her, I will



“‘SHE WAS THERE!’ SHE CRIED HOARSELY, POINTING THROUGH THE IRON GATES” (p. 197).

do it!" he cried passionately—"she who has marred all my life."

"You need not go so far to find her," cried a croaking voice, almost in his ear. Pierre turned and saw Janette Chaudron standing beside him, evidently much moved, and trembling. "She was there," she cried hoarsely, pointing through the iron gates of the churchyard, with her shrivelled fingers—"she was there not an hour past, and grabbing at Angela's grave. I saw her."

"You saw her," cried Pierre with a terrible blaze of wrath in his widely distended eyes, "and you—you did not fall upon her, and tear her limb from limb? You did not call aloud to the town to rush upon her and destroy her?"

Janette had evidently not expected Pierre's wrath to fall upon her, and she cowered a moment before it, with bent head and guilty fear-struck mien.

"I cried out, but none heard me. I rushed forward to seize her, but falling over a grave near the pathway, she escaped me, and running quickly through the side gate, she disappeared. Are thirty gold pieces nothing to me, Monsieur Pierre," cried Janette angrily, "that I should play false in this matter? but there are days when the angels themselves may not interfere against the powers of darkness, and this is one of them."

"Much thou knowest about angels," retorted Pierre furiously. "I believe the earth does not hold so miserable a coward on its surface as thou; thou black-hearted hag," cried he, turning from her with a passion which swept all before it, "I will hold thee responsible for this day's work!"

CHAPTER XVI.

STILL IN THRALL.

THIRTY gold pieces was indeed a large sum of money for the little town of Protogno to offer out of its coffers for the apprehension of the witch, Christine Delemont. In fact, it was a fortune in itself, and would have made rich any of the villagers who had had the courage to go forth and earn it; and when first the news was made known in the town, and while Angela's death was fresh in all their memories, many were the plots and projects concocted over village fires, and dire was the vengeance sworn; but as yet all efforts had proved fruitless, or had been abandoned through fear of the consequences; and as time ran on the villagers ceased to talk of this possible increase to their wealth, and preferred the peace of their quiet homes to the fear of death and the torrent of evil which might fall on their houses were they to draw down Christine upon them and their families.

A fresh thrill, too, of horror had run through the village when it was discovered, a few mornings after Angela's funeral, that all the placards that it had cost so much to print had been torn down in the night, and that the child of the man who had posted them on the church and elsewhere had been seized with cramps, and would certainly have died before morning had not Janette Chaudron been called in, who, with one of her rare nostrums, had brought him back from the gates of death.

The Mayor blustered, and stormed, and vowed he would have new placards printed ; but the days rolled on, and no new placards appeared. Old Biondino, too, was strangely indifferent about the arrest of his daughter's supposed murderess. He never encouraged any gossip at the inn about Christine, or the money offered for her apprehension. He seldom, indeed, spoke of Angela ; but it was plain to all that she was ever in his thoughts. All the wishes he had ever heard her express, no matter how trifling, or how difficult to comply with, he busied himself to carry out now. He went regularly to church, and he ceased to abuse the lazy waiters who broke his china and otherwise disturbed his peace.

All the love and care left in his heart he gave to the old chef who had been Angela's loyal friend and devoted slave from the time of her birth, and who now, crushed by the blow of his young mistress's death, had fallen into a melancholy from which nothing could rouse him, and which sometimes bordered so nearly on the despair of madness that they dared not leave him to himself, lest in a moment of unbearable anguish he should put an end to his life.

The Mayor occasionally thought of increasing the price set upon Christine's head. His righteous soul was still all aflame with anger, and it chafed him that none should be found willing to incur personal risk so as to bring so great a monster to justice.

He would himself have headed any expedition to go forth and search the country for her, but he could find none to join him, and now the time for such an effort was temporarily passed, as the true winter, with its heavy snow and black and bitter frosts, had set in

at last with a more than usual vigour, and hills and dales were alike impassable. Only the high roads and a few well-beaten mountain paths were serviceable for use, and even these latter were often inaccessible. The Mayor knew that for the present all efforts to track out his enemy must prove unavailing, so he resigned himself to his fate, with the fixed resolve in his heart that with the first breath of spring he would be on the alert again, and that no danger to himself should daunt him from making the effort necessary to secure the capture of Christine.

There was one other person in the village on whose assistance and hearty co-operation Monsieur de Pressyne felt he might have counted, but he could not bring himself to sue for such assistance.

Between the Mayor of Protogno and Pierre Milano there lay an unspoken enmity, perhaps more on the Mayor's side than on Pierre's, for he knew that Pierre had been preferred before him, that Angela had taken some strange mysterious interest in his welfare, while to him she had been so unaffectedly civil as to show him that she was totally unconscious of his admiration.

From soliciting help from Pierre, therefore, the Mayor shrank; though deep down in his good-natured heart he pitied the lad whose face only too clearly betrayed the hopeless anguish of his heart. He watched him evening after evening pass up the low vineyard hill to Janette Chaudron's hovel, with nerveless steps and eyes which looked ever straight before him with the curious intense expression of a soul troubled about many things. He watched, too, with an ever-increasing curiosity the flushed cheek and the changed gait of the lad as he returned from these visits.

The well-worn path up to the ruined castle, in one

of the cellars of which Janette had made her home, led past the many-paned side windows of the Mayor's residence, and as Pierre walked by them each evening on his way home, the lamp which hung at the corner of the house always fell full on his face, for on those occasions he held his head erect, and fire seemed to flash from his eyes.

The Mayor, sitting in a darkened corner of his private room, watched ever for this moment with an unreasonable interest, and wondered what project held the lad in thrall to a woman so loathsome to see, and the sound of whose voice was like the evil croak of the ravens. That it had something to do with the capture of Christine he never doubted, but he himself had little faith in Janette or her nostrums, while he hated the very sight of her face, and he felt a surprise that a powerfully-built lad like Pierre, whose courage was well known in the town, should place himself so unreservedly in such a schemer's hands; but of one thing he felt certain, namely, that Pierre would never come to claim the thirty pieces of gold even if he were successful in bringing Christine to justice. It was not the lust of gold that shone in Pierre's eyes, as he descended the vineyard and hill; no, it was a more sombre flame, a fire which money could not kindle and only blood could quench, and the Mayor said to himself sorrowfully, "He will snatch this triumph from me also, as he has already snatched the fairest hope of my life."

CHAPTER XVII.

THIRTY PIECES OF GOLD.

IT was now four or five months since the mysterious disappearance of the placards which we mentioned in our last chapter. The snow and the frost were all gone; the bound-up streams, which had slumbered so long within their stalactite courses, were now rushing headlong down the mountain-sides into the river beneath, and the roar of their multiplied descents rejoiced the ears of the villagers, both by day and night, as it spoke to them of winter gone and spring at hand. There were meetings now in the market-place, of aged people and young children, who, living on the extreme habitable heights of the mountains, had never risked the danger of a descent into the valley until the snows had melted, and the early flowers had raised up their heads from their long sleep; and now, attired in their Sunday best, the hardy mountaineers rehearsed their winter experiences to the more favoured inhabitants of the valley, and showed off the infants, whose limbs had grown fat, and whose limp hair had circled into golden curls, since last they had met and said adieu. *Then* the air was heavy with snow, and the piercing north wind had bid them prepare for the coming winter; but *now* all was changed, and the bells of the goats, liberated from their long confinement, sounded deliciously on the hills, borne down by the soft western breeze into the valley. Cheeses were brought down each day into

the town on the backs of the sturdy mountain-born peasants, the product of their winter's dairies, and sold to the villagers on market days, or exposed in long lines down each side of the street, when many of the folk were still asleep in their beds, and the tips of the snow-clad mountains were only just donning their morning crowns of gold.

For even in this little town there was a brisk trade kept up with the outer world, and dealers in the peculiarly rich-flavoured cheese of these lonely valleys came from various parts of the world, with their long wooden charettes, and carried them off by the hundred, to dispose of again, at exorbitant prices, to the fashionable inns of Paris and Marseilles, and even over the borderlands, across the swift-flowing Rhine, to the palaces "unter den Linden," where the aristocracy knew the cheese well, and appreciated its delicate aroma of wild flowers.

It was in one of these very sweet-scented pastures, where the wild flowers actually grew in such profusion as to give the grassy slopes the air of an extensive flower garden, that Antoine Fedele lay on an early summer's afternoon, on his back, gazing idly upwards at the fleecy clouds above him. Myriads of bees murmured round his head, or boomed against his rough leather suit, while the goats which he had just driven up to pasture, apparently as listless as himself, wandered hither or thither, with outstretched necks, daintily sniffing at the herbage, or moving on restlessly in their pursuit of the choicest and most delicate morsels.

Antoine was an artist in his very soul. He had inherited from his father and his grandfather a passion for art, and the rare beauties of Nature, by which he

was surrounded, had for him a voice which none of his companions in the town could understand, or even dimly enter into, but to-day his thoughts were not in tune with the objects which surrounded him ; he did not notice the blue smoke curling up so picturesquely against the dark background of the pine forest, or the golden haze of morning resting still half suspended over the valley. The hum of the orange-backed bee, as it struck against his cap, and swung off again, murmuring busily, had no hidden music for his soul, nor had his eyes, as they unconsciously scanned the skies above him, any sublime vision of the world beyond. No, Antoine saw none of these things, for his heart just now was being searched by a fiery and almost overpowering temptation, and he felt that on the resolution now taken by him would hang the success or failure of his whole future. Only this morning his resolve had been fully made : he had felt that nothing could move him again from his resolution, and yet as he passed out through the door to take counsel with his friend Pierre, a few words spoken in his ear by one who guessed the struggles of his mind, had shaken him to his very centre, and made him hesitate ere he took the last irremediable step.

"Antoine, my son, remember Judas sold our blessed Lord for thirty pieces of silver, and gave Him up to a fearful and cruel death, and wilt thou now for thirty pieces of gold follow his base example, and enrich thyself by the blood of the innocent ?"

Those words of warning, uttered in his ear by the low voice of Marie Fedele, had startled him from dreams of a glorious future, and forced him to question himself as to the nature of the step by which this future was to be attained, and the answer given to

him by his now aroused conscience was painful and upsetting in the extreme. The lust of gold, when once it takes possession of a man's heart, is indeed an almost quenchless flame; one may stamp upon it with momentary horror, or drench it with remorseful tears, but the embers of the fire are only covered up, and the flame, unless wholly extinguished at the outset by a determined hand, and an eye that looks not back, will blaze up surely again, and burn on until happiness and hope are both alike and for ever consumed. Once, in a neighbouring village, Antoine had seen a copy of a famous picture, which at the time had made a great impression on his mind, and now it recurred to him vividly. It was a representation of Judas, after he had betrayed his Master, with his hand still grasping the silver, but his eyes full of a terrible remorse. This picture had haunted Antoine for months afterwards, until he had taught himself to forget it, but now, at the words uttered by Marie, it had risen up again; and with a shudder at the thoughts of his treachery, he determined to shake himself free from the coils of this golden net, lest he too might at some future time share in the futile remorse of the traitor disciple.

At this crisis of his thoughts Antoine started from his reverie, and, fancying he heard a step, raised himself up on his elbow and looked around him. But there was not a soul in sight; it was only the creaking of some pine branches in a tree close at hand, from which a frightened bird flew out with a sudden hoarse cry of fear. Antoine mechanically lifted his eyes to search for the hawk which had no doubt caused this alarm, but ere he had found it his thoughts had wandered off afresh, and the old war had begun

again in his bosom. Had not Pierre told him that with thirty pieces of gold he could visit Paris, aye, Florence itself, and see the great paintings of the old masters; and that boys poorer and less educated than himself had, by industry and determination, conquered all surrounding difficulties and made themselves masters of their art? And, after all, was it not an act of charity to the world at large to bring to justice a bad and desperate woman like Christine Delemont, whom even the kind-hearted Mayor had condemned? But why at this point of his mental struggle did Antoine always shrink from his own thoughts, and pause painfully? Why did his memory always re-enact a scene which gave the lie to Christine's powers of witchcraft? Why did his house in the valley rise up painfully before him; the moonlit chamber with his mother's figure standing watchfully on the balcony outside, and the black-cloaked figure kneeling by the cot within? Aye, he knew why. He had crept to the kitchen door that night to hear the witch's curse, and, like Balak, he had heard instead the pathetic blessing of a grateful soul. He had listened for sinful words and baneful suggestions, and he had heard instead an earnest appeal to the Saviour, who loves and pities the young and suffering of His flock; and many and great bounties were craved from heaven upon his father's house and all who dwelt therein; and thus Antoine's conscience once again rose up in startled protest against his own evil thoughts.

But what about Angela? Who was it that had brought her to her sudden and most unaccountable end? This cruel, treacherous death was generally admitted by the town at large to be the work of

Christine ; and had not the very animals, who knew no harm, fallen down stiff and cold beneath her withering shadow ? Poor Angela ! how well Antoine remembered her, with her graceful ways and her guileless eyes, and her step so full of life and freshness, and now she was lying dead in the valley. Well, it was one comfort that Angela had never feared death. He had often heard her say how willingly she would give up her life for those she loved, and how earnestly she had spoken to him of heaven and the life beyond. He could remember her grave eyes, and how the tears came into them when she spoke of Pierre and the doubts he entertained of future bliss or pain.

Here Antoine, to judge by his varied expression went off into another troubled reverie, and though two goats which had been browsing close by his feet for some minutes past, suddenly engaged in a violent and angry warfare, striking their heads and viciously butting against each other, he did not notice them or look up. But by-and-by the large orange-bodied bee, which had so long circled round Antoine's head with noisy sudden swoops and loud drums of anger, all at once struck in its hurried flight against his cheek, and fell with a wrathful buzz upon the grass beside him. With a lazy curiosity Antoine turned for a moment to observe the aggressor, the sun shining on its gauze-like quivering wings, making them glisten with lovely prismatic colours, the band of orange round its body, the continual murmur of its drone, the thread-like proboscis searching with hurried movements for the honied stores in the flowers around. This humble insect, as it climbed clumsily up the grassy stalk into the sunshine, and then fell

murmuring into a neighbouring flower, with its perfect workmanship, and busy, untutored energy, gave such a curious check to the question, or rather the dark doubts which had risen in Antoine's mind, that, throwing himself back on the grass with a sudden, hasty movement of relief, he exclaimed, passionately, "Then I will listen to him no longer. There is, there must be a God, and I will not, like Esau, give up my birthright for Pierre's mess of pottage."

"What about pottage? Art thou hungering for food at this hour of the day?" cried a well-known voice in Antoine's ear, and Pierre Milano, giving his friend a hasty slap on the shoulder of his jerkin, threw himself down on the grass beside him.

"Where on earth didst thou drop from?" cried Antoine, sitting up in scarcely concealed vexation and somewhat disconcerted amazement. "I looked round a moment ago and there was not a creature in sight; of that I am certain."

"I dropped from the branches of yonder pine-tree," replied his companion, with another loud, unmirthful laugh. "I have been hidden there this some time back watching thee and thy movements, and there was not a thought in thy silly mind that I have not read as easily as if it had been written on the grass beside thee."

"Thou couldst do nothing of the kind," replied Antoine, proudly. "I defy thee to tell me of what I have been thinking."

"Well, well; perhaps not, my friend. In any case, it was not to quarrel with thee that I came up here, I assure thee."

"Why on earth, then, didst thou come? Thou art always following me from place to place. I never

toil up here and sit down to rest but thou art sure to overtake and disturb me. Why dost thou not look after thy own flocks on the hill yonder, instead of leaving thy mother to scramble after them all day under the scorching sun?"

For a moment Pierre's sallow face darkened, and his sleepy eyes showed sparks of angry light, but he answered presently in his usual listless tone—

"Thou knowest as well as I do why I come, and why I still intend to loiter in these pastures; at any rate, yesterday it was quite understood by thee what my reasons were, though perhaps to-day thou mayest have some sudden reasons for forgetfulness."

"I have not forgotten," replied Antoine, making a desperate effort to follow the leadings of his conscience, and to crush down the guilty pleadings of his heart—"I have not forgotten, but I do not see why thou shouldest make *me* the catspaw of thy private revenge. I do not care to have the price of blood in my pocket, and I have made up my mind not to go further in this business. My mother——"

"Aye, aye, your mother; it is always the same cry," replied Pierre, contemptuously, as he drew up a tall spike of grass and aimed its glittering shaft at the still restless body of the bee on whose nest Pierre had thrown himself down. "I came up here," he continued, with the same listless air of contemptuous indifference, "to tell thee a piece of news which concerns thee nearly, but I had better not tantalise thee with the recital, for thy mother doubtless would not approve of her stepson wandering so far from her apron-strings."

At these last words Antoine sat up and gazed at

Pierre, not angrily, but with a searching anxious gravity, to ascertain if possible what amount of credence to place in his last insinuation.

"If thou hast anything to say, say it out," he replied presently, though he glanced uneasily away as he noticed the contemptuous smile which lit up Pierre's face.

"The Mayor's brother, Monsieur de Pressyne, is going to Italy in ten days, and he is searching everywhere for a lad who can read and write, and who can speak Italian, and I instantly thought of thee, Antoine. Thou needest not, however, torment thyself in the matter, for I did not mention thy name, and it will be for thee now to apply for the place or to let the matter rest," and Pierre, having thus explained his mission, lay back on the grass on his folded arms, and contemplated with apparent earnestness the clouds drifting over his head.

Antoine remained for a long time lost in thought, his eyes fixed on one of the shining buttons on his jacket; and it was Pierre himself who once more broke the silence, beginning, to all appearance, on a new and indifferent subject, though in a strangely cool and measured voice.

"Antoine, dost thou know, I have made a great discovery? I have at last found out a clue to the hiding-place of Christine and her cub, and what is more, thou hast known it thyself this long time past, and yet thou hast concealed it from me."

"I have known nothing of the kind," replied Antoine, turning angrily on his friend; "thou sayest that for the purpose of drawing secrets from me."

"Thou hast not a secret left, my good friend, for me to draw forth. Your mother and mine, good souls

as they are, had a long and most satisfactory conversation on these subjects this morning. They thought thou wert with the goats, and that I was safely housed at the inn, helping the old chef in his cooking; who, by-the-by, is grown so blind that he was serving up to the table d'hôte a pottage into which a mouse had fallen from one of the rafters overhead. But to continue: I, being instead snugly ensconced in my own room, and the window lying wide open, I heard all the secrets of the town, and much more that was not intended for my ears; how thou, Antoine, art to be sent away to a boys' school at St. Gall, and how I am to be circumvented in all my efforts at discovery. My poor, good mother," said Pierre, in a voice not altogether devoid of a certain tremulous weakness, "is uneasy about my future, and she wishes me to become a kind of ally of the curate. I am to be sent there first of all on an errand. The curate is to show me his books of piety, and is to interest me in his collection of rare butterflies and insects; ha, ha!" added Pierre, with a strange, unnatural laugh, "how clever the best of women can be, when they wish to gain their point! And then, when we were both out of the way (oh, I forgot to say, I was to travel for awhile with the curate), when we were both, as I say, out of the way, an effort was to be made to help this kind-hearted, gentle-natured were-wolf out of the neighbourhood, and to put the little white-haired cub, Paul, into a house for imbeciles."

"They need not trouble themselves long about Paul," interrupted Antoine, who up to this time had preserved a gloomy and impassive silence, "he will have a better house than that ere long."

"How so? with whom?"

"In a place where *thou* at least wilt never be," replied Antoine, bitterly.

"Oh, I see! I can fathom the depth of thy prophetic wisdom, my good fellow, and can satisfy myself for the present with my own house, nor have I any need to visit the good curate; his books and insects are, no doubt, exciting and interesting, but I prefer to follow out my own plans. When you have returned from your schooling, you will perhaps become a curate yourself, and with two such learned friends I could not fail, in time, to become all that my best friends, even my poor mother herself, could desire."

"Pierre," said Antoine, in a hoarse voice, "are you in earnest, in saying that my people propose sending me to a school?"

"Quite; at least so your step-mother said," and Pierre lingered contemptuously on the first syllable of the hated word.

"Was nothing said of my father?"

"Nothing with regard to the school, but plenty with regard to other things. Indeed," continued Pierre, speaking in a quite excited voice, "I do not see why I should not tell thee now as well as any other time. I heard *that* said of thy father, Antoine, for which, knowing it as I do to be truth, I could bring him to-morrow before the Mayor, and have his home made more unpleasant for him in future than even the one you so kindly foretell for me; at any rate, the punishment would be a deal more certain and swift."

Antoine, who up to this moment had been gazing intently into Pierre's face, now turned quickly aside, and uttered some unintelligible phrases in a low voice, the only distinct syllable which Pierre could catch being the word "traitor."

"No, I am not a traitor ; it is the last thing I should care to be. Had I been such, I should not have repeated thus openly all my newly-gained knowledge."

"I cannot see your motive even now," said Antoine, hoarsely.

"For telling you?"

"Yes."

"Well, I have no objection to make it as clear as day to you. It lies thus in a nutshell. I am determined to discover and bring to justice Christine Delemont, and her attendant imp, Paul. For her apprehension there is a reward of thirty gold pieces offered. Ha, Antoine, you need not start round, and smile so superciliously. I have no wish to touch one penny of this money ; in fact, were I to win it to-morrow, I should hand it over, or at least the greater part, to the person who seemed most in need of it. It is no thirst for gold that tempts me out on this undertaking, nor would I even claim it willingly. If I can induce any one to accompany me now immediately in my search for revenge, and that I succeed in the object I have in hand, I will give the whole sum, except five gold pieces, to the person who aids me ; and if I must speak out my very thoughts, I would rather thou, Antoine, wert the gainer of this sum than any one else. With it thou wouldest be free to make a brilliant start in the world. I have already said a good word for thee as a valet and courier to Monsieur de Pressy's brother, and with this sum in thy pocket, once thou reachest Italy, thou art in the very hot-bed of painting and art, and then there would be nothing to stop or hinder thy progress. On the other hand——" Here Pierre once more hesitated, unwilling perhaps to spoil the effect of his carefully studied inducements.

"On the other hand?" repeated Antoine, anxiously.

"Well, you cannot imagine I am so immaculate as not to seize on every point in my favour as well as thine, especially when it may aid me in my particular ambition."

"Continue."

"Well, I have already told you. Your father has compromised himself hopelessly by tearing down the Mayor's placards, which he himself had been paid to put up."

"He was not paid to put them up," replied Antoine, hotly.

"Well, then, to illustrate them. It comes to much the same thing; and your mother, she also helped in their destruction, contrary to the Mayor's edict, so she has aided and abetted in the protection of this vile woman and her idiot *protégé*."

"How so?" interrupted Antoine.

"Well, in many ways. Some of her strange doings you have yourself informed me of. She harboured her in her own house on the very night of Angela's death; thou knowest she did," cried Pierre, bitterly; "and since the proclamation that has been issued against her, your mother has had food and clothing left surreptitiously at Christine's old home near the forest, and *you yourself*, Antoine, were on one occasion made the guilty medium in this transaction. I half suspected your errand this morning was in the direction of the forest, and therefore I hid myself in the pine-tree; but now I have told you all, I will leave you to think over it for awhile; and remember, Antoine, as surely as I swear to hand you over the sum, if together we track Christine to her den, and successfully secure her, so equally I vow that if

you refuse to join with me in this undertaking I will summon you, your father, and your mother before the Mayor, and all that I have heard to-day from the lips of your own mother shall be brought up in judgment against you; and what your punishment will be I need not warn you of, nor indeed do I care to think of it myself, for those who join hand in hand to shield and protect a witch are, as I dare say you know, judged as her accomplices, and the punishment would fall with equal severity on all."

As Pierre finished speaking he rose, with a certain air of magisterial dignity, to his feet and drew himself up to his full height.

"Well," he said, seeing that Antoine took no heed of his last speech, but remained with head averted and hands tightly clenched together, as if forcing himself to maintain a silent and indifferent manner—"well, my friend, farewell. To-morrow morning early, before five, I will look you up at the old saw-pit behind your father's house, when I shall expect you to be ready to accompany me, or else to allow things to take the course I have indicated."

Then Pierre turned on his heel and walked slowly down the hill-side, treading down the stalks of the yellow-fringed and pink daisies with his feet; but when, on the edge of the hill, he stopped and looked back, Antoine was still in the same attitude, nor had he withdrawn his gaze from the far-off hills which lay beyond him.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PIERRE'S COMPACT.

PIERRE'S path down the hill led him directly past the little churchyard. It was the shortest way to the village, and he was already late for an appointment he had made with the Mayor, and yet he chose another and much more tedious road to reach his destination, in which he had rocks and trees to circumvent, and loose stone walls to surmount, and mountain streams to cross; but this afternoon, aye, for many an afternoon previously, he had preferred this circuitous route to the path beneath the pines and chestnuts which led past that long grey wall, and the narrow iron gate through which he knew the perfumed scent of violets was issuing softly on the mild spring air.

For Pierre had grown of late to hate the smell of violets, and the sight of Angela's quiet grave filled his heart with such a terrible "unrest" that he durst not look upon it, or think of the sweet, still face which it had hidden from his view.

He had a task to perform which must not be shaken by such thoughts as those which invariably rose up when he gazed through those iron bars, and which put him out of tune with the all-engrossing purpose of his heart.

For, to look into that heart just now was a thing impossible. It would be simple weakness to pause or hesitate when he had joined hand in hand with the

Mayor to effect their common object, and the eyes of the whole town were awaiting the issue.

Yet there were moments when this pool of darkness was troubled, and it seemed to the lad as if an angel were standing on its brink, needing but a word, an upward glance, to step in and purify its waters ; but Pierre could not utter that word, for the palsy of sin was upon his soul, and his conscience, though it cried out to the angel to step in, was not listened to.

For three short days after the death of Angela, it seemed as if all were to be different. Pierre had cried out, had looked up, and had thought that he believed. Yes, for Angela's sake, it appeared he had resolved to lead such a life on earth that he must attain at last to that land where she was gone before. A wonderful glimpse of God's holiness seemed to have passed before his eyes, and a thrill of some surpassing joy had momentarily stirred the sluggish waters of his soul ; but since the day Angela had been laid in her grave, his spirit had relapsed into its original gloom. The fire which had kindled his soul with enthusiasm had suddenly died out ; the heaven which had seemed so near had vanished from his eyes, and the comfort which Angela had prayed for with her latest breath, had found no resting-place in his heart, and Pierre was content so to let it be.

It was enough for him that one he loved, innocent, guileless, and trustful, had been done to death by a being who did not deserve the name of woman, and that, were it not for the fatal influence this being had exercised over his family, they would now be prosperous, his father would be living, his mother would still be rejoicing in her husband's affection and protection : and he himself, how had he suffered ?

Ah! that thought it was which stung his whole soul to bitterness, for Angela, might not she have been his? It was true she herself had never given him this hope, but, had she been spared to live, she might, she would have done so.

The strange interest which Angela had lately shown in this ungrateful woman's welfare was now plainly proved to him by Janette and the Mayor to have been a part of the witchcraft exercised by Christine over her, whom she wished to charm to her destruction. This supposition, indeed, needed no proof greater than the fact, now well known in the village, that on the very night when Angela had been doomed to death so cruelly and swiftly, she herself, with her own sweet and persuasive voice, had begged this woman's life and liberty at the Mayor's hands, and had won from him the promise that he would set her free at an hour when, the town being asleep, she would be able to effect her escape without subjecting her to the perils and terrors which daylight must necessarily have exposed her to.

That the Mayor bitterly regretted having yielded to Angela's entreaties, no one could doubt who saw the comparatively wasted frame of this once robust and cheery magnate; but whether he would have resisted the same appeal, could it have been made to him again under the same circumstances, only his own heart could tell. Though he had erred through the weakness of his nature and the strength of his great love, was he altogether the inadvertent cause of her death, or were there not others even more to blame than he was? Biondino himself, had he not something wherewithal to accuse himself in the matter of his daughter's death? It was equally well known in the

village that on the eventful day preceding Angela's decease, he had, with his own hands, thrice plunged this detested woman in the icy "Lac des Sapines," nor desisted until he believed her dead. Was it then to be a matter of surprise if vengeance, swift and dire, had fallen on his house, and that his hearth had been left unto him desolate ?

These reflections had a kind of comfort for the soul of the Mayor, for they shifted the burden of responsibility from his own shoulders to those of another ; but the swift retribution which had been dealt out to the innkeeper did not deter him from running the same risks himself, and as the months rolled on, and no one came forward to claim the price set on Christine's head, he resolved to make overtures to Pierre, and see if he could not induce this young and fiery heart to join with him in the endeavour to bring the vile were-wolf, their common enemy, to justice.

Pierre at first met his advances with a cold reserve, and at the first allusion to the gold pieces, he flew from the presence of the Mayor in a frenzy of rage, nor would he admit of the smallest recurrence to the subject for weeks following.

Meantime it had not been difficult, from the few words which Pierre did let fall, to gather that he had secret projects of his own for Christine's capture, and that he cared little to have the matter pried into by others. That he worked himself, and with his own hand, to secure his prey, was evident. Not for the sake of the yellow gold which might make him rich and independent, nor to rid the country of a dreaded and detested being, but for stronger reasons, perhaps too deep for words, as he never alluded to his motives,

or to the subject, but as a pure business transaction, which it concerned him chiefly to carry out.

It was therefore a matter of no small amazement to the Mayor when, some months later, Pierre, of his own accord, presented himself at the Mayor's residence, and entering his study, began with evident embarrassment on the subject which he had hitherto held so proudly aloof from.

Still greater was the Mayor's amazement when Pierre, with flushed cheeks and eyes, in which pride and shame contended, made allusion to the money, and said it was possible he might hereafter be necessitated to claim the thirty pieces of gold, "not for himself," he added, with a quick flash of scorn, but for those to whom he might be indebted for aid in the matter, and whose services he could not count on without an adequate reward.

The Mayor would now have willingly volunteered his own personal assistance, but Pierre turned a deaf ear to all such suggestions. He was evidently possessed of some new and secret intelligence with regard to Christine which had fired his soul to sudden madness.

The Mayor and Pierre were closeted that evening for hours, and for many evenings afterwards they had long and anxious consultations ; but so reticent was the latter on the subject, that not one in the village, not even his own mother, suspected the wasting fire which was ravaging her son's heart, nor guessed at the near approach of an enterprise which she dreaded both for Pierre and herself more than the hour of death itself.

CHAPTER XIX.

AT THE SAW-PIT.

THE saw-pit, which Pierre had selected as the decisive meeting-place between him and Antoine for the morning following their conversation on the hill-side, and where he hoped to receive a favourable answer from the latter, lay considerably to the rear of the Fedeles' chalet, and, except when the work of chopping and sawing was going on, was a lonely enough spot. Pierre had purposely chosen this deserted locality, for he fully expected to have many and fierce words with Antoine before he could induce him to join him, or perhaps abject entreaties and appeals to his better feelings which he should find it difficult to resist; and although Pierre was prepared to meet them all, and to combat every scruple and excuse to the death, still he wished his exhortations to be unheard by any ear save that of his friend, and as Sebastiano and Marie were both of them early risers, he had to guard against the possibility of intrusion.

The morning was certainly in favour of Pierre's expectations, or so it seemed to him, for the sky was cloudless, the air unusually warm and balmy, and a primrose-coloured background to the hills gave a golden burnish to the snow-clad mountains and to the tips of the pine-trees at their base.

As Pierre, closely followed by his dog Wolf, entered the outskirts of the Espandre's woods, he hesitated a moment, and, having taken counsel with

himself, he detached a sickle, which on quitting his own house he had fastened carefully into his belt, and having hung it on a branch of a tree close beside him, he proceeded to disembarrass himself also of a gun which he held somewhat awkwardly in his hand, and to lay it also aside against the trunk of the pine.

Then, turning to the dog, he pointed to the ground immediately beside and beneath the tree, and said, under his breath in an accent of stern command—

“Lie there, you, and do not budge an inch till I return.”

The dog, accustomed to obey, immediately crouched down on the spot indicated, only turning an inquisitive and somewhat saddened glance after his master, as, with slow and cautious steps, he made his way as noiselessly as possible through the wood.

As he neared the saw-pit he came to a halt, and, drawing the pine branches carefully aside, he looked towards the spot where he was to meet Antoine, anxious, in the first place, to discover whether the lad had yielded to his persuasions and threats of yesterday and had kept the promised tryst, and further, if at his post, to scan his face and judge with what amount of interest or regretful necessity he was about to join him in his search.

But Pierre, having gazed through the branches, fell back, startled and flushed, and drew his breath sharply. Antoine was there only too surely, and by his dress and the chamois knapsack strapped to his shoulders, it was plain he was prepared for the proposed journey; but Pierre's eyes had caught sight at the same moment of another figure in the wood, whose attitude of despairing entreaty had caused this sudden catch at his heart, a heart which he had



"AT HIS FEET . . . KNELT MARIE FEDELE" (p. 223).

deemed latterly almost dead to such qualms of human weakness.

Antoine himself was standing with folded arms pressed against the trunk of a tree which over-shadowed the saw-pit, while his head was bent forward on his breast, so that the bitter struggles of his soul might be hidden from the eyes of her who gazed upon him.

For at his feet, in the damp sawdust and rank grass which fringed in the mouth of the saw-pit, knelt Marie Fedele, trying, with outstretched arms and low words of entreaty, to turn towards her the averted face of her step-son.

"Antoine, Antoine," she pleaded in her tenderest accents, "listen to me ; turn thy face to me ; am I not thy mother ? have I not given thee even more affection and care than the children God has blessed me with ? Hast thou no heart, Antoine, that thou wilt not listen to me, but preferrest the company of this Pierre, who has no higher aim in life than to make his hands red with the blood of the widow and the orphan, and who would lead thee on to share with him this most cruel murder, and afterwards divide with him the price of blood."

"Oh, mother ! what sayest thou ?" cried Antoine, covering his crimson face with his hands. "If thou couldst but know, thou wouldst not torture me so. I cannot draw back now, it is impossible both for thy sake and for mine."

"For my sake ?"

"Yes, yes ; for all our sakes."

"For all our sakes !" cried Marie, starting, and pausing a moment to consider Antoine's words. "Well, let it be," she added passionately, "I care not

what idle threats the great coward has devised to drive thee into sin ; do not listen to him, Antoine. It is all the same whether one perils one's soul through the fear of man or for the lust of gold."

"Mother, thou knowest not what thou sayest, nor what a terrible power Pierre can wield against us if he chooses. It is not only *my* life he can and will ruin, if we anger him in this matter, but thine and my father's and the children's." And Antoine, turning sharply round from the tree, threw himself on the ground beside his mother, and sobbed aloud.

"Thy father's life and the children's?" said Marie, slowly. "Oh, he knows something, then ; and perhaps he guesses more?"

"There is no guessing in the matter," cried Antoine, bitterly.

"It is impossible that Pauline has betrayed us, or thou ; Antoine, hast thou told him aught?"

"He knows from me," sobbed Antoine, guiltily, "that the night Angela died, Christine, whom he looks on as her murderess, was received into our house, and that Paul slept for hours on thy bosom."

"Is that all? Let him know all that," cried Marie, with a deepening flush. "It has been the town's talk. Pierre cannot bring us to trouble on that score, for the Mayor's edict was not published then."

"Oh, but he knows even worse than what I have told thee. The placards which were torn down and destroyed ; he has heard all about them."

"And thou hast told him this also?" asked Marie, in a tone of the bitterest reproach.

"Nay, mother ; this, and much more, he has heard elsewhere ; it would only add to thy pain to know how he gained his knowledge."

"Not Pauline, surely?"

"Mother, do not press me to answer. Pauline is as true to thee as the sun in the heavens."

"Then hide nothing from me, tell me all, even the very worst," cried Marie, clasping her hands and rocking herself to and fro.

"He knows also," cried Antoine with a great gulp in his throat, "that thou, that I too, have carried food at night time to the cottage in the wood; he has now even obtained some clue to their hiding-place, of which even I am ignorant; in fact we are one and all implicated, and can be ruined at his word."

"And who is this, sayest thou, that knows all these things against us, and will presently urge us to our death?" cried Marie, with a great burst of anger. "Is it Pierre Milano, our friend; he who has been like a son or a brother to us all, and who, in sickness and in sorrow has found shelter and comfort beneath our roof. If it is Pierre, and he truly proposes to bring his threats into execution; then I will not fear him, for God can bring the counsel of the wicked to nought. He can foil all his machinations, and He will not allow such villainy to go unpunished."

"Pierre has sworn to reveal all he knows against us to the Mayor, and that immediately, if I do not yield my will in this matter entirely to him; and only late last night I noticed him come out of the Mayor's house, with a folded paper in his hand, to which I saw with my own eyes the large red seal of the Mayor affixed. Thou seest I have but a sorry choice to make, and, as I hold thee, and father, and the little ones more precious than the lives of others, I am resolved to go."

At this moment Marie started to her feet with a

sharp cry, and Antoine, also rising, gazed with terror-stricken eyes into the darkness of the plantation, where a large branch, having suddenly broken away from the stem of one of the nearest trees, revealed the crouching figure of a man, who had evidently been concealed amongst the pines.

"Traitor," cried Marie, instantly recognising the pale face and burning eyes of Pierre, "what doest thou there, cringing like some vile beast in the shadow of our trees. If thou dost not depart, and that quickly, from this place, I shall seek out one stronger than thee, who will show thee no more grace than thou wouldst show to us, and who will crush thy viper's head beneath his heel."

Pierre did not move from the spot where he stood, or reply by movement of face or figure to the passionate words which burst in such unmeasured strength from Marie's lips. He merely waited till she had finished speaking, then looking straight at Antoine with no friendly glance, he cried, "Art thou ready? If so, follow me now at once, for the morning is already advanced. Let him who dares, follow, or interfere with me."

So saying, he turned on his heel, and pushing his way roughly to the spot where he had left his dog, he took the sickle from the tree, and, shouldering his gun, strode out on the high road, or rather bridle path which led by a series of gentle zigzags towards the upper valley.

CHAPTER XX.

THUNDER CLOUDS.

PIERRE did not even look back for some time to see if Antoine were following him, but, accompanied by his great dog Wolf, he walked along the bridle path, with his head bent forward on his breast, in utter silence, and apparently indifferent as to the fact whether Antoine were about to join him or not. But when he came to the spot where the bridle path divided into two separate branches he paused, and waited quietly until Antoine's still hesitating footsteps had brought him within earshot of his voice. The path which they had followed hitherto, if persevered in, would have led them straight down into the village where it became merged in the high road, a lovely winding avenue, shaded on either side by plum and cherry trees, and leading up into the very town itself; while the other, a far narrower, and, in fact, scarcely discernible track, brought one by a somewhat steep and sudden ascent, over a spur of the mountain, into a second valley beyond. This farther boundary, when reached, was a mountain thickly covered with pine forest, at the foot of which still glowed, like some crimson star, the deserted cottage of Alexandre Delemont, the woodranger. For, though now tenantless, and gradually falling into ruin, the scarlet climbing plant originally planted by Paul's young mother, when, as a bride, she came to the cottage, now rioted over the place, in all the glory of its rich and blazing

foliage, clambering over the rustic chimneys of the chalet whence the pale blue smoke no longer issued, mounting picturesquely upwards into the evening air, and thence, having no further worlds to conquer or to scale, it descended to the edge of the roof, and hanging in graceful festoons down over the cottage eaves, gave to the eye of a stranger the appearance of crimson tassels, reaching almost to the painted flower-beds beneath.

Just at the very point where Pierre had halted, and where the roads branched off at such opposite angles, there stood, from time immemorial, a large flat stone, many feet in circumference, where it was the almost invariable habit of travellers to halt and rest, for few crossed this steep and jagged spur save weary foot-passengers, or hardy mountaineers with their heavy packs on their backs, containing, as a rule, the far-famed cheeses of the villagers around, or the merchandise which had been realised by their sale.

On this stone Pierre sat down, and, without looking round at Antoine, he desired him to be seated.

His voice was hoarse and agitated, and it was some time before he gathered the necessary resolution to lay bare his plans; and even when he did speak, there was a reproachful anger in his voice which it distressed Antoine to listen to.

"Well," he said at last, "I have received a good lesson this morning. It is a pleasant delusion to labour under, that one has at least some friends in the world, and out of those few, a few perhaps more beloved than the rest, even two or three that one can count upon, and trust in the hour of difficulty and danger. But the veil of self-deception has just been,

somewhat rudely I confess, withdrawn from my eyes, and I now see myself as I am, an outcast from the rest of the world, with but one friend I can turn to and rely on—if even there I am not deceived—and that is my mother. My father is dead,” continued Pierre huskily; “Angela also, who perhaps in her gentle innocent soul loved me even better than my parents did, is gone also. There was one other woman whom I believed in, and who might have done something for me and my future, but even her woman’s tongue, merciful and forgiving even to the very outcasts of the earth, has dubbed me traitor, and has threatened to crush my viper’s head, whilst the one companion of my childhood has, at the very moment when I was planning his future fame and advancement in the world, joined in blackening my character, and has heaped accusations on my head, accusations that at least he might have delayed.”

“Pierre, thou must know, thou must allow,” cried Antoine, in hot and eager self-defence, “I said not a syllable but what thou thyself——.” But Pierre proceeded, as if unconscious of interruption, “accusations that he might at least have delayed, to prove the truth of, ere he urged them in confirmation of all he wished most to be believed against his friend.”

“It is false,” cried Antoine, now heated and injured beyond control, “every word thou utterest is false; true in the letter, but false in the spirit. I have brought no accusations against thee but what are true, and as to the friendship that thou sayest I have thrown over, how can a man go hand in hand with one who demands as the price of this friendship the base betrayal of another’s secret, and the surrendering thereby of two innocent souls to a cruel and bloody

death, or, if one fails in compliance with this demand, father, mother, even the little ones at home must suffer. There are two sides to every story, my friend, and ere thou makest me out to be a hypocrite, look to thyself; consider the base bargain by which thou hast bought my assistance, a bargain which will bring tortures of remorse in its train to me, if not the loss of one at least of our immortal souls."

"Then you have made up your mind to accompany me?" asked Pierre, suddenly turning round and confronting Antoine, with eyes which, though still moist from the rush of some sudden feeling, now burned with a suppressed anger almost terrible to look upon.

"Yes," replied Antoine, sullenly.

"Proceed, then, and show us the way. It is already almost mid-day, and we have, as I understand, no short walk before us. How long will it take us to reach this witch's den? Three hours or four?"

"That I cannot tell. I know no more where Christine lives than the water running across yonder rock."

"You told me yesterday on the hill-side that you knew all about it."

"I said nothing of the kind."

"You implied it."

"I implied nought; it was you asserted everything. As far as the Delemonts' cottage lies, I can guide you there, and that by a short and tolerably easy path, but beyond its garden I am as ignorant of the path as you are, for not even to mother would Christine confide the secret of her hiding-place."

"Not even to mother!" echoed Pierre, bitterly;

"it shows how strong are the links of friendship in that quarter."

"Aye!" replied Antoine, hotly, "I must be wary of my words when my future accuser is the companion of my walk."

"Come along," cried Pierre, taking Antoine's arm, which was yielded with a most indifferent grace; "come along; perhaps I am not quite so bad as thou wouldest paint me. In either case, neither of us will gain anything by quarrelling. I am resolved to push my search to the bitter end, let that end be what it may, and no words of thine will shake me. But to prove to thee that my intentions towards thee and thy people are not so maliciously vile as thou wouldest have it be believed, look here. Here is a letter I have obtained from the Mayor this morning, in which, should we" (Pierre dwelt on the word "*we*"), "in which, should we be successful in our search and bring even Christine to justice (Paul is not of necessity included in the bargain), if we succeed, I say, in discovering the she-wolf herself, or can even inform the Mayor to a certainty of her dwelling-place, he will not only pay to me the thirty gold pieces already named in the placard, but he will add to it half as much again for thy share of the proceeding, making in all a sum of forty-five, and which placed in full in thy own hands and for thy own private use, will give thee, Antoine, a grand start in the world, and with enough money in thy pocket as can, if well applied, place thee on a footing with the first artists of Italy." Pierre paused a moment, thinking Antoine was about to reply; but it was only a sharp, short breath, as of pain, which issued from his friend's lips, and Pierre, anxious to press his

point to the uttermost, continued with increased *bonhomie* of manner: "And, what is still more fortunate, I happened to light on the Mayor's brother himself while I was alone in the waiting-room yesterday. He came in to look for some papers he had left there, and I felt somewhat shamefaced at having to introduce myself. I at once opened up the subject of thee and thy love of art, and, if I did not give thee a good character, well" (and Pierre uttered a somewhat bitter and meaning laugh), "at least I said better things of thee behind thy back than I had the pleasure of hearing of myself this morning. But we will let that pass, for I have only this much to add, that if ever a fellow had a good opening carved out for him in this world, in fact, a straight road to fortune, it is thou; and on Monday morning next, it is all arranged, unless in the meantime you put your foot in it, you start together for Florence; and not only will your journey there be paid, but you will also receive a liberal remuneration for your services, the exact amount of which I did not care to ask, for it is well known in the town that the Professor is one of the most liberal men living."

As Pierre concluded this long exordium, he handed the letter he had drawn from his pocket to Antoine, the very letter sealed with the Mayor's red wax which Antoine had seen with Pierre in the morning, and from which he now felt he had drawn somewhat unjust conclusions.

"Thank you," replied Antoine, with a dry and husky throat; "I do not need to read it; you have told me its contents." Then, with a kind of pain-extracted confession he added, kicking a whole bunch of violet heathbells off their wiry stalks, "Thou

hast in this respect been kinder to me than I deserve ;" then, uttering almost unconsciously the burden of his mind, "and if the cause were not sinful, how willingly would I enter into it all."

"Sinful," echoed Pierre, suddenly halting and laying his hand on Antoine's shoulder, while this time he looked at him with no shifting gaze ; "and thou verily thinkest it in thy heart sinful to join hand in hand with me in this matter ? Now let me speak for once, and, for thy sake, clear my soul in this business. If when thou, Antoine, wert guarding thy mother's sheep on the hill yonder, a wolf came out of the thicket and snatched from under thy very eyes a sheep from thy flock, and tore it to death cruelly in thy presence, leaving it bleeding and mangled, to die by inches on the ground, and if, unable to pursue or hurt this monster, thou sawest it again returning presently and snatch the weakling, motherless lambs which are the special care at present of thy daily life ; if, at this juncture, a friend were to place a gun in thy hand and say, 'Take this, use it, and put an end at once and for all to this bloody, cruel animal,' wouldest thou hesitate and say, with downcast eyes, 'The act is sinful' ? Answer me."

"There is no need to answer. I would slay it, but the case is different. Christine is a human being with a soul, and must first be proved a witch, if, indeed, witches exist upon the earth at all."

"Ah !" cried Pierre, bitterly, "it is easy to see thy mother's teaching runs through all thy words ; but were a husband or a child to be snatched from her in the prime and beauty of their lives, what would her feelings be, and what her hatred of the hand which so

cruelly robbed her of all she loved? Ha!" cried Pierre, suddenly halting in the fervency of his speech, and flushing crimson, "I see by the sudden shrinking of thy eyes the parallel thou art drawing in thy mind, but I have not yet extended my hand to injure her or hers, and on thy shoulders, not mine, lies the guilt if I am driven to do so ; but for once, as thou hast a heart in thy body, look at my life, and see have I no cause for that I would do. My father was brought to his grave by Christine's machinations ; my mother has been estranged from me also through her influence ; and Angela, I need not tell thee, Antoine, what cruel havoc she made there in my life. All this, one would think, were a cause sufficient to fill the measure of my anger ; but when I know that those I loved with all the strength and truth of my heart, and who are now in their graves, are still the prey of her malignant persecution, how can I rest and take my ease and leave them to bear their most unmerited sufferings?"

"How can they suffer, being dead?" asked Antoine, open-mouthed.

"But they do suffer ; nor will they know peace or rest until she who caused their death is slain. I have read it, and I have heard it, and, if that were not enough, I have had proof of it with my own eyes and my own ears."

"It is impossible! We know they are in heaven."

"And I know that they are not!" cried Pierre, fiercely. "Ask Janette Chaudron, who hears them all night long wailing about the hill, and crying for release from their bondage. She can tell thee what their sufferings are. The worm which never dies, and all the tortures of a life in death. I, I myself have heard the cry, and I tell thee, Antoine, that, rather

than hear it again, I would plunge this sickle into my own heart, and trust that the blood of another sinful soul poured out upon the ground might release them from the bondage of their grave."

"Where didst thou hear this cry? in the churchyard?" asked Antoine, awed by the words and expression of his companion.

"Nay, not in the churchyard. The very fear of it keeps me from the spot, for Janette has heard them crying there too; but close by the ruin. It was at night, and as I went down by the vineyard from Janette's house a white figure fled past me, and as it disappeared into the darkness before me it turned round, and, throwing its arms up into the air, cried out, "Christine, have pity on me!" I know now who it was. It was my little Angela," said Pierre, under his breath, "for she appeared to Janette on the same night; and can I rest, and breathe, and eat, and drink, and sleep, and know that she who was ever so pitiful and full of love for others is herself flying in an agony before the fear of her pitiless persecutor, and can never know the rest which death should bring until this vile woman is slain."

"And were she slain, dost thou believe then that at that moment Angela would enter heaven?"

"Ah, that is another matter. It is time enough to think of that when the deed is done; though this much I will say, if there is a heaven she will be there."

"But supposing the deed is not done, and that, failing in our project, Christine revenges herself upon us, shall we also suffer as they have done and are doing?"

"Nay, that I have guarded against. We might

meet some treacherous enemy, and thus come to an unforeseen and sudden death, just as we might fall at the hand of any human foe, but while I wear this amulet around my neck" (Pierre drew from his bosom a strange-looking dark object, formed in the shape of a heart, and which appeared to be made either of dark leather or skin, tied with a crimson thread at the top), "while I wear this amulet no effort of Christine's can affect or influence me. I am proof against all the blackest wiles of her wolf-like nature; and I have this morning received an assurance from Janette that its protecting powers will extend to thee also. She has added a new charm to it of great and unequalled power, and at a cost which was somewhat startling, too, in its magnitude. Janette knows how to drive a bargain, I assure thee."

Antoine looked somewhat curiously at the amulet, then turned away his head quickly to conceal an irrepressible smile of contempt.

"I have not much faith in these concoctions of Mother Chaudron's," he said presently. "I cannot see how this can protect one from harm. I would as soon face the danger without it."

"It not only can, but will protect us," cried Pierre, angrily; "have I not proof of it when I tell thee that ever since my father's death I have worn this round my neck, and though Christine knows I hate her with a bitter and undying hate, she has failed, so far at least, to work me any ill in my own person. She has worked me ill enough, heaven knows, in other ways. I tell thee," cried Pierre, growing testy at his companion's continued hesitation, "with this charm in our possession she can do thee no harm. That is to say, she can exercise no malignant influence over thee or

me. She cannot strike thee dumb with a word, or shrivel up thy arm, or slay thee with a glance as she has done others. It will be a trial of strength, a man against a fiend."

"And yet," hesitated Antoine, with almost a tremble as of guilt, "doth it not seem, on the other hand, a somewhat cowardly act for two men to go forth armed to fight one weak and aged woman?"

"Weak and aged woman!" screamed Pierre, now almost beside himself with rage, "one vile she-wolf, pitiless, brutal, who would drain thy heart's blood remorselessly, and has the strength of ten fiends enclosed in her woman's hide! What! wilt thou never believe until you see her wolfish corpse hung up in the market-place, or until your own mother and a few more hang there instead, as a warning and a scare to others? Come on, let us have no more words. I would not crave thy cowardly assistance, were it not that, knowing as I do the danger I am facing, I desire to have a witness, let him be ever so faint-hearted, to carry back to my mother the tidings of my fate. The veriest coward would do this much for his friend, and yet thou shrinkest from the task; but I tell thee this, Antoine, if thou drawest back but one step from this business, now we are so far advanced, I will not scruple to shoot thee dead on the hill-side; for if neither fear nor money will bind thee to me, still less the friendship of a lifetime, then were it better to have no friend than a false one."

Antoine, scared by Pierre's words and the fury with which they were uttered, and perhaps more terrified still by the white face and livid lips of his companion, made no response, but walked on in silence by his side. He had brought no weapon with

him. He was altogether at Pierre's mercy, and in his present mood, Pierre would not hesitate to carry out his threat. Besides, now that he had pleaded all his own side of the question, and thus in a measure quieted his conscience, Antoine, with the usual weakness of his character, felt inclined to yield, not only to the threats, but to the wishes of his companion. There was fame to beckon him on, gold to dazzle him, the excitement of a dangerous expedition under the leadership of a friend who had always exercised an irresistible influence over his actions; and, to support all these selfish suggestions, which even now he dimly recognised as suggestions of the evil one, he had to place in the same balance the life of all those he held most dear to him, his parents, the little ones at home. For their sakes alone he ought to, he would, set aside these weaker qualms of a troubled and bewildered conscience. If Pierre was right, and Christine was the hateful wretch he (Pierre) at least firmly believed her to be, then, indeed, the warfare he was entering upon would be a righteous warfare, and her destruction would be a boon to all. So reasoning in his doubting soul, he advanced with brisker steps, keeping pace with Pierre, who, still much angered, walked slowly forward.

They had now come close to the crest of the first hill, and both paused when they reached it to rest a moment, for the morning was unusually warm and sultry.

"We shall have thunder presently," said Antoine, looking across at some leaden clouds which, issuing up behind the mountain, formed a strange but most effective background to the peaks now tipped with ruddiest gold.

"Thunder!" echoed Pierre, with a startled air and a questioning glance, full of anger, directed towards his companion. "Is this another effort to break thy contract and escape from me?"

"How so? Why should such a matter interfere between thee and me?" asked Antoine, curiously.

"If it thunders, we are undone. It is no question of interfering between thee and me; it is simple destruction to our hopes."

"I cannot understand it," replied Antoine, simply.

"For that thou hast never taken a grain of interest in the matter; but to go forth to war against such as Christine at such a time, when the very elements are in strife, and evil triumphant, it would be hopeless, it would be worse than vain."

"Who says so?"

"What signifies it who says so? I have read it, and heard it, and know it to be a fact. It is not one fiend we should have against us, but scores. However, *I* see no signs of thunder; that grey cloud yonder is only the mist which is rising from the valley beyond. The air is fresh enough, and except for that one comparative speck the sky is clear and bright." But even as Pierre spoke he lifted his cap from his head and drew a long, deep breath. The air was not so fresh as he imagined; nay, now, as he stood still, he found it almost oppressive.

"Antoine, what art thou gazing at?" he asked, impatiently; "art thou seeking for fresh means of danger?"

"Nay," replied Antoine, with a longing glance at the sky, "I was looking at the magical effect of the light on that hill opposite. I was thinking;" he paused, "I was wondering," he continued, blushing crimson,

and averting his eyes from Pierre's earnest, enquiring gaze, "I was asking myself if I ever really should become a great artist, that if I were to give myself wholly up to it, if I were, as you suggest, to go to Italy later on and make it my study?"

"Yes, yes, of course you will," cried Pierre, reviving at Antoine's words; "you have only to stretch out your hand, and the prize you desire is yours. But if you would win it we must hurry on, for in the afternoon the weather may change, and we have probably a long morning's work before us. Come on, my friend, we shall yet gain the day if we put our shoulders in earnest to the wheel."

"Yes, yes, that we shall," cried Antoine, eagerly, as he adjusted his knapsack, and grasped his stick firmly; "here, this is the most direct path," and Antoine hummed a song as he stepped lightly over the heather.

The morning was unusually still; a bell high up on the hill-side was ringing for morning prayers, and its deep-toned notes vibrated with an almost painful distinctness on the ear. The mountains opposite seemed to Antoine as though he could cast a stone into their purple clefts, while the tinkling of the cattle bells was distinctly audible from the far-off glistening pastures.

"How beautiful!" he cried, enthusiastically, pausing once more in his song and progress to admire the valley. "Look yonder at Delemont's cottage, does it not seem ablaze with those gorgeous leaves and flowers? What a glowing centre-piece to the whole picture!"

"Yes," cried Pierre, somewhat bitterly, as he noticed the complete absorption of Antoine in his own affairs and future; "yes, thou art fortunate indeed;

thou hast life, and ambition, and fame, all stretched out before thee, all thy very heart's desire placed within thy grasp, whilst I, what have I? One object only in life, and when that is accomplished, as I trust it will be this very day, then thou mayest carve my bed for me in the sod, for I would rather die than live. Yes, in that sense I am better off perhaps than thou, for death can be won on even easier terms than fame."

As Antoine turned from his contemplation of the mountains to gaze in questioning awe at his companion's face, there was a rustle in the heather close by. Wolf, the dog, sprang forward with a hoarse bark, while Pierre laid his hand instinctively upon his gun, but it was only a little trembling white rabbit which, disturbed from its couch in the dewy bracken, now endeavoured, quite blind with terror, to effect its escape by rushing across their very path.

"Down, Wolf, down," cried Pierre, with a sudden fierce energy of tone, as he dashed forward to stay the slaughter of this harmless innocent.

But almost before he spoke, the deed was done. There was one sharp cry of pain, and all was over. The dog, alarmed at the anger in his master's voice, withdrew from the prey he would willingly have secured, and the rabbit, a ruffled heap of snow-white fur, flecked only with the stain of its own death wound, lay straight across Pierre's path.

"What cruel brutes these senseless animals are," cried he, raising his gun, so as to strike the dog with its heavy butt, but some sudden thought withheld him; he raised his eyes quickly to the snow peak opposite, scanning it earnestly, as if for some lost chord or strand of memory which lay hidden in its shadow.

The remembrance must have come at his bidding, for with a groan Pierre cast himself upon the heather and covered his face with his hands.

"Do not heed me," he cried to Antoine; "this heat is stupefying, and makes me faint."

Antoine gazed wonderingly at him for a moment; then tossing the rabbit into the cleft of a thick-growing furze bush, with a vague suspicion that its death had something to say to Pierre's unwonted emotion, he returned to the contemplation of the view before him, but the jewelled colours and the almost unearthly beauty of its light and shade had faded suddenly away. The grey cloud opposite had drawn a curtain over the magic rays of light, and a gloomy chill had fallen over the whole landscape. The bell, too, on the hill-side had ceased its soft appeal, while a sirocco air was sifting up now from the valley beneath with a swift eagerness, rattling the dry leaves of the taller ferns, and bending the branches of the stunted pines which grew here and there on the brow of the hill where they had halted.

"The heat is certainly most oppressive," cried Antoine, with a long-drawn sigh of disappointment, as he seated himself wearily on the ground beside his friend. The cloud seemed to have fallen on his heart also, causing all the vibrating melody of hope and ambition to cease within it; and in its place, with the swift whispering of the wind, a murmur had risen to disturb him, the murmur of a woman's voice, saying with an endless pleading repetition, "What will it profit thee, Antoine, to gain the whole world and lose thy own soul?"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CHEF'S SECRET.

IT soon became apparent to the villagers of Protogno that some new misfortune had overtaken two at least of the inhabitants of their town, on this hot and oppressive morning. The door of Marie Fedele's chalet remained, strange to say, closely fastened, and none went in or out, or appeared on the wooden balcony above. This was all the more strange as the doors generally lay wide open, in hospitable invitation to all who chose to enter, be they rich or poor. The hungry, the thirsty, or the tired wayfarer, in fact any one seeking an hour's repose, or a night's lodging, in his weary onward course, always found in Marie a kind and generous housewife. The bread made by her own white hands was given ungrudgingly to those who needed it. Her cider was the sweetest and purest beverage in the town, and those who had been permitted to rest a night in one of her neat upper chambers could not but bear grateful testimony to the easy couch ; the linen, sweet with lavender, and white as the snow on the mountains opposite ; the brightly-polished brass stove ; the pine-wood floor without a stain, and the dainty white curtains, with their crimped frillings which hung over the brass pole above the bed, and which also shaded the square-cut window through which, as if set in a frame, one could see the great hills beyond, the pine forests, and the spreading pasture fields, and hear the rush of the mountain torrent as it hurried

along in the deep ravine yonder. Marie had an eye for all that was pure and graceful in Nature, and in every corner of her house one could see the reflection of her liberal mind, and loving, generous heart.

But those who clambered this morning up the gallery steps with their carved banisters, to the upper entrance of the *châlet*, heard no response to their continued knocks and calls for admission. The door was closely shut and the jalousies were fastened across the windows. They were therefore obliged to descend into the garden again, not one whit the wiser for their knocking and prying than when they went up.

Many, surprised and frightened at this strange state of affairs, made bold to try and burst open the back door of the house to see if illness or trouble of any kind had taken possession of it, but the back door was too securely fastened to be so easily forced, and one, more adventurous than the rest, who had thrust her head through a broken square of the window in a lower chamber, was met by a cold demand from some one seated out of sight in the room, as to what was the cause of this unseemly intrusion.

One of the most constant visitors and enquirers, during that long day, at the Fedeles' *châlet* was the landlord of the village inn, the father of poor Angela.

Again and again he came to the gate leading up to the gallery, and looked at the closed jalousies with an impatience and distress of mind which were visible to the curious groups gathered in the main street of the village.

At last it became generally known in the town that the old chef of the inn, who for the last year had been failing rapidly, and who had lately passed into a state of helpless melancholy, was dying ; since early in

the morning his last agony had set in, and with it, whether from a wandering mind, or some particular death-longing, he had called without cessation on Marie Fedeles, begging earnestly that she would come to his bedside and see him, if only for a few moments, as he had somewhat to say into her ear before his departure from the world.

But no Marie was to be found. If she was shut up in her *châlet*, it had now become evident she had no intention of coming forth, let the call be from whom it might; but later on in the day, a neighbour, who had been out early on the mountain side, set all tongues wagging by declaring positively that he had seen Marie herself at six o'clock or thereabout flying at full speed along a far mountain track, with only a shawl thrown over her head, and that when he had called to her to know what was the cause of so much haste at such an hour, and above all in such a wild and strange part of the mountain, she had made no reply, but only quickened visibly her pace, until, almost in the twinkling of an eye, she had disappeared out of his sight.

This story was received, to say the truth, at first doubtingly, by some of those who heard it, for the narrator was a man with but one eye, and that one was admittedly by no means bright, and as this one eye was in the habit of seeing most wondrous and strange sights, both by night and day, the men for the greater part shrugged their shoulders, and said, "Hearken to the old simpleton; he has seen perhaps a goat or a hare scrambling up the rocks, and straightway he bears witness to a miracle. It is impossible." For that Marie Fedeles should have been seen racing over the distant hill at that hour of the morning, would indeed be little less than a miracle!

But perhaps the saddest and most agitated heart in the whole town was hidden that day in the bosom of Pauline Milano. She had entered her son's room at an unusually early hour that morning with a cup of freshly-made coffee in her hand, for she thought he had seemed restless and distressed the night before, and he had complained of headache, pleading it as an excuse for retiring early to his bed.

She had opened the door quietly, given one anxious glance towards her son's couch, and then the cup of coffee had almost slid from her hand, and a groan issued from her lips; for she perceived, with a sudden anguish, the jealousies and casements were already thrown wide open to the morning air, and that Pierre's bed was empty.

Poor Pauline! she staggered to a chair by one of the windows, and, laying down the untasted cup of coffee on the ledge beside her, she covered her face quickly with her hands, for a sudden conviction—a revelation it almost seemed to her—had come over her mind of the cause of Pierre's departure, and she knew now that at length the moment had arrived when all her worst fears were about to be realised, and that Pierre had finally gone forth with sinful zeal to conquer or to die.

It was needless for her to look again at the faint crescent-like mark on the wall above his bed where the ill-fated sickle had hung so long unused. It was gone, and the purpose for which it had been taken was no secret to her; and yet only last night Pierre had been more tender in his manner to her than usual. He had said little, it is true, but once or twice, hearing him sigh heavily, she had looked up and seen his eyes fixed upon her. He had kissed her, too,

before he went to bed, a loving custom which for some time had been totally neglected ; and now she remembered also how he had asked her the day before, when she was cutting bread for his supper, "Is not that ring on thy right hand mine, mother, the one that was my father's?" She had replied, "Yes, dearest ; dost thou desire to wear it? Thou knowest I have only kept it till thou hadst a wish to wear it thyself;" and he had answered, "Nay, my mother ; keep it yet a while longer ; it may serve to remind thee of both of us." At the moment these words had startled her, but when she had looked up at Pierre his face showed no sudden rush of sentiment, and he had presently whistled an air, and now it was a rare thing for him to whistle or sing.

Pauline sat for nearly an hour in the chair by the open window pondering over all these things. She felt faint, too sick at heart to go forth to her duties, or to face the long day of loneliness and despair. Her thoughts could not be calmed down to everyday life, but kept rushing on, pursuing feverishly the results which must almost of necessity follow upon Pierre's undertaking.

That he had gone forth to hunt down the unfortunate Christine and her grandchild Paul, she could have no doubt, and that he would succeed she doubted still less. Pierre was not one to act in haste ; his project had been too long and too carefully considered to fail, and yet what he would deem success would be to her ruin and misery.

The friends she loved best in the village were, she knew, terribly inculpated in the affairs of Christine and the child. Marie Fedeles had herself told her in what a dangerous position they stood as regarded the

Mayor and the placards. If Christine and Paul were successfully caught in the wily snare which she felt no doubt Pierre had laid for them, the least injury that could arise from their capture would be a sickening sacrifice of human life ; but it was impossible not to foresee that in the inquiry which must precede this terrible drama something would leak out calculated to draw Marie and her family before the public, when they would be placed in the light of aiders and abettors of witchcraft and sin.

It was thinking over all these possibilities that had caused the colour gradually to fade from Pauline's cheeks, until they became of an ashen grey, and once again a deadly faintness ensued. She turned her face with a deep sigh from the empty bed, and the shadowy crescent on the wall, and allowed the breeze from the mountain to sift through her white hair, and over her whiter face. But presently other thoughts seemed to come ; for, after a long and steady gaze over the tops of the hills, where clouds were now gathering ominously, she slid from her chair to her knees, and, with her eyes still fixed on the sky beyond, she poured out a short but earnest prayer to the God who reigned supreme in the heavens beyond, that He would watch over Pierre, her only son, in all his works and ways, and turn him aside from his evil intentions, or overrule the works of his hand and the erring thoughts of his mind, to God's glory and the honour of His holy name.

As soon as Pauline had risen from her knees and had in some measure collected her scattered thoughts, she went down the chalet stairs, and, straightway opening the door of her house, passed out into the village street, determined, as was usual to her in all

her difficulties, to see Marie Fedele, and hold loving counsel with her over what course was best to pursue.

As she passed Wolf's kennel, within the garden gate, she noticed that it was empty, and when she called to the dog there was no response. This served to increase her fears, for it rendered the danger to Christine and the probabilities of the discovery infinitely greater. For Wolf was one of the best-trained dogs in the town, and could vie with any greyhound in sharpness of scent and fleetness of foot, and if ever Pierre chanced to come upon the trail of the unfortunate outcast, there was small hope for her ultimate escape.

Pauline had hardly crossed the space between the garden and the road when she stopped and looked anxiously across at the mountains and at the clouds which were gathering ominously above and around them. There was a heavy sulphurous smell in the atmosphere, which she knew well as a presage of coming storm, and as she passed on a few steps farther a hot gust of wind, like the blast from a furnace, came up the valley and swept across her face.

Pauline was no cowardly woman. She had, like Pierre, a strong will to dare and to suffer, and her feelings were usually cloaked by an almost rigid and indifferent manner; but in the presence of one of the fierce mountain storms which occasionally visited the town of Protogno with terrific force, she was incapable of all self-control, and became more panic-stricken and unreasonable than a child.

Now, with a pang of additional terror, she remembered that Pierre was far away in the pine woods opposite, and that, if her fears were realised, she would have no one to stand by her through the

horrors of the storm, and, worse still, that the danger he must run at such a time would be increased ten-fold by the proximity of the forest trees; for it was seldom indeed that a bad thunderstorm visited Protogno without a score of these giants being laid low in the woods, and not a few inhabitants had perished in their depths by foolishly, in their fear, seeking for themselves and their flocks the shelter of the forest.

Pierre, too, though scorning to show fear, and always ready to support her in her moments of weakness, had latterly experienced himself some of those unreasonable sensations of nervousness, whenever the air had been unusually electrical, or when ominous clouds had gathered behind the hill.

He had never pleaded guilty, it is true, to such weakness; but she had noticed a restlessness of manner, a sudden pallor come over his face; and often at such times he had ceased the work he was engaged in, and spoken with an abruptness about things which evidently had no real interest for him, but only to cover the unsettled state of his mind.

Pauline thought of him now, alone and unfriended, far away from assistance, and obliged to face without support the inevitable advent of the storm.

For inevitable it certainly did appear. There were dull, saffron-coloured clouds rolling up now in threatening billows behind the hills, and the air had that oppressive hush of stillness which falls heavily on a nervous and agitated heart.

Pauline, before proceeding to her friend's house, mentally weighed all these signs of approaching disturbance to gauge whether she could reach the shelter of Marie's chalet before the storm actually burst

overhead ; and finally she determined to push on ; and she hurried feverishly forward until she reached the corner of the road, when she stopped and gave a quick gasp of pain, for there was quite a crowd gathered in front of the Fedeles' house, and the road thence down to the inn was also full of people moving restlessly to and fro.

Pauline leaned against one of the green acacia trees which grew at intervals all down the central street of the town, and asked herself with a sinking heart whether her worst fears had already been realised, and whether Marie and her husband were even now in the grasp of the law.

"What is it, my dear friend ?" asked she, with dry lips, of old Carl Wettstein, the village carpenter, who, with bent crooked back, and his basket of tools on his humped shoulders, slowly came up the pathway.

"Nothing," he said, in his sharp, unneighbourly voice, and was passing on, when Pauline, putting herself in his path, questioned him again.

"But why, then are the people gathered in the street? There is nothing wrong with our good neighbours, the Fedeles ?"

"Nothing, that I know of ; but these idle gobe-mouches who have nothing better to do than to meddle with other people's affairs are all agog with amazement, because a respectable householder and his wife choose to lock the door of their home for an hour or so in the morning, and not leave it open for every idle tramp to walk in or out of it who chooses. There they are peering and clacking like frightened geese, and stretching up their silly necks to try and see into their neighbour's dwelling."

"And is the door still locked ?" asked Pauline

"Aye, it is ; and it would make an older fool than I am laugh to see that one-eyed gander, José, waving his long arms and crying ' I saw her on the mountain this morning. Oh, yes, good people, I saw her ! ' "

"Who?" cried Pauline, with a too evident and feverish curiosity.

"Why, thou art as bad as the rest of them," replied the old snarler, with a contemptuous shrug of his heavy shoulders. "Who else could it be but Frau Marie, who José swears his one eye saw skipping like a chamois from rock to rock and then, good sooth, suddenly disappearing into the bowels of the earth, when she became aware of the great José's presence ; but," continued the old man, in his turn now leaning his shoulder against the slender branch of the acacia, "what made me laugh till I cried, was to see the round-bodied Mayor standing opposite José with gaping mouth, swallowing every word he said, as if it had been gospel, and old Biondino standing by white as a sheet."

"The Mayor, and Biondino," gasped Pauline, her panic increasing with every fresh sentence, "why, what had they to say to it?"

"Well, to do the innkeeper justice, he was, as far as I could learn, the only one who had any real business there. The poor old chef is in extremis, and instead of sending for his ghostly comforter, he calls incessantly for Frau Marie, and says he has somewhat to tell her, which must be told ere his soul quits the body, so he has been fighting off death since five o'clock in the morning, calling and crying, even with tears, that she would come to his bedside. Why they don't send some one else to him, and make pretence it is the Frau, I can't think, for he is as blind as fifty moles, and too near death to be nice in the detecting of a voice."

"Oh," cried Pauline, sympathetically, "the poor old fellow has never been the same since his young mistress died ; he was as fond and proud of her as her own father. Indeed, some say he felt her death more sorely. Certain it is he could not bring himself to look upon her fair young corpse, though for all there was to see she might have been sleeping in her mother's arms. Neither did he follow her to the grave, but sat weeping by the kitchen stove, till the very dogs licked his hands for pity and looked up into his face. But, by-the-by," she added, with a gleam of hope, "Carl, didst thou happen to meet my son Pierre? He is gone out for a ramble with his dog, Wolf, and I am searching for him, as his meal is cooling within in the house?"

"Nay, I saw nought of him. He is not one of my pets, that I should keep a look-out for him," cried Carl, resuming his unpleasant manner, and withdrawing himself from the shelter of the tree ; "he is a trifle too lazy to suit my book. No doubt you will find him as usual hanging over the bridge yonder. It is almost a pity he does not topple over into the water some day, and get drowned. For all the use he is to this town he might be dead long ago," and Carl, regardless of the pain his words inflicted on the poor widow beside him, hoisted his basket on to his shoulders, and turning the corner of the road, was soon out of sight.

Pauline had now no courage nor energy to go forward. The ever increasing gloom and darkness made her fearful of remaining far from the shelter of her own house, so only waiting to wipe the tears from her eyes, which Carl's unkind words had called forth, she also turned on the pathway and moved slowly back over the road she had just travelled.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE BREAKING OF THE STORM.

THE morning which had begun so ominously for Pauline Milano seemed to deepen in despair as the long day wore on. To describe the darkness and restlessness which filled the poor widow's heart would be impossible. The dry choking sobs brought no floods of cooling tears to relieve the fiery anguish of her mind. Could she even have shared her grief with Marie, her distress would not have seemed so unbearable, for Marie had such responsive ways and words, that one felt, in speaking to her, as if she really did take a share of the burden, whatever it might have been, upon her own shoulders, while her suggestions were always full of wisdom and love. No quarrel was ever originated by Marie's interference, nor did she ever repeat words to her neighbours, which, uttered in moments of passion, might have brought about dissensions amongst them, while mere scandal-mongers and gossips found neither a welcome in her house nor evoked any responsive echo in her breast.

To Pauline, the cause of Marie's voluntary imprisonment, or absence from home, seemed at first inexplicable, but as the day dragged heavily on, doubts and fears, at times almost unbearable, crowded into her mind. Could it be that Marie, through the medium of Antoine's friendship with Pierre, or by her own quick perception of facts, had become aware of Pierre's sudden resolution to surprise Christine in her

hiding-place, and had taken this interval of safety to make good her flight from the town, and thus to save her family and herself from the cruel results which were certain to follow upon Christine's capture ; results so terrible that Pauline durst not trust herself to think of them ?

These fears grew in intensity as the hours went by, and no tidings came of those she loved. Fearful of moving too often to and fro through the town, Pauline constantly inquired of passers-by whether Marie had yet opened the door of her chalet, or whether she had been seen in the town, but the answer was always the same ; not a stir had been heard in the place, the jalousies were still closed ; no beds had been shaken and hung out to air at the upper windows, as was the invariable custom of Marie or her maid, nor had the babble of the children resounded through the wooden walls. Meanwhile, the old chef at the inn had made a temporary rally. Having heard whispers in his room that Marie had probably gone on an expedition to a neighbouring town with her children, and might not be home till nightfall, he had asked for some nourishment, which, before, he had refused to swallow, and had sworn that he would keep his soul safe within his body until he had seen her, and then it might fly away as fast as it pleased, for the world was a sorrowful place to sojourn in when all was darkness around one ; and then he wept, and wandered on, talking of *La Signorina*, or sometimes he smiled looking upward, as if he fully recognised how thin a veil separated him now from the little maiden pure and fair, who had been dearer to him on earth than his own children.

The storm which Pauline had apprehended and

looked forward to with such awe and timorous apprehension, did not break with real fury over the town till quite late in the afternoon. Indeed, once or twice beautiful bursts of sunshine had broken through the clouds, set the birds piping again, and giving, by contrast, weird and almost pantomimic effects of sudden brilliancy, which only made the succeeding gloom more oppressive and overpowering.

But when the storm did begin, it was appalling in its outbreak. Pauline had been standing for some time at her garden gate, straining her weary eye-balls towards the pine wood on the mountain slope, across the river, and especially in the direction of the deserted home of the Delemonts; for, low down, near the fringe of wood, not far from the cottage, she fancied she had seen a puff of white smoke, followed immediately by the report of a gun, which reverberated through the hills. Could it be possible, she questioned herself, that Pierre had gained possession of his father's old fowling-piece, and that he was even then in hot pursuit of the luckless woman whose life he so thirsted to take. Pauline shuddered till the little wooden gate on which she leaned rattled on its hinges, but soon her thoughts were diverted from this gloomy channel, and forced, most unwillingly, into even darker forebodings.

Behind the mountain stretched a lowering bank of cloud, dark, opaque, and curled at the edges, like a huge inky wave, which was rolling on ominously from some distant sea. Behind this monster cloud lay another less black and threatening, its edges even fringed with a dull orange tint, but which seemed divided from its darker companion by an immeasurable distance.

A bird, which had been perched on a twig close by the gate where Pauline stood, suddenly at this moment uttered a shrill piercing note of fear, and as Pauline lifted her eyes to follow its upward flight, a quick darting snake of living fire ripped open the cloud opposite, cleaving it asunder from end to end, while with a crash, as if the earth itself had received some staggering blow under which it reeled, the thunder-clap followed, and Pauline, covering her face with her apron, turned and fled into the shelter of her house, where, hiding herself in the darkness of the narrow wood-closet beneath the stairs, she remained, crouched in the farthest corner, striving, with hands tightly pressed against her ears, to keep at bay the stunning uproar of the storm outside, which seemed in its fury to threaten total annihilation to the village and its inhabitants.

When, however, some time had passed, and Pauline's thoughts became even harder to endure than the wrestling of the elements outside, she ventured to push open the door of her prison and look about her. A momentary lull had come in the storm, but no rain had as yet fallen to cool the parched ground, and the air was still sulphurous and oppressive.

A terrible restlessness now took possession of her mind. To remain in the house seemed impossible to her, and, going out into the road, she wandered up and down the village street. She strained her eyes down the road leading to the Fedeles' house, but a group of idlers gathered round the gate convinced her that Marie was still invisible. One effort she made to reach the Fedeles' house through the road near the sawpit, but there fresh terrors beset her, for under the shade of one of the pine trees she picked up a tuft

of jay's feathers which she knew belonged to Pierre's hat, and which she had seen stuck jauntily in its side only the evening before. This discovery gave additional colour to her fear, for now she felt sure that Pierre had halted at the Fedeles' on that very morning, preparatory to his setting out on his bloodthirsty expedition, and thus had in some way aroused the fears of the household, and driven them to seek refuge in flight or temporary retirement from the village.

Pauline wandered desolately about on the heathy common outside the wood, wringing her hands and beating her bosom, till at last, wearied out, she sat down to rest on the very stone where Pierre and Antoine had held such bitter converse in the morning. She remained there, however, only a short time, for though the sun was now rapidly descending towards the mountain tops behind which it would soon be lost, there was still a blinding glare, and her head ached almost as sorely as her heart; and even while she still looked hesitatingly around, uncertain where to turn or what course to pursue, the storm, which had only relaxed for a while from its fury, burst out again with redoubled rage, and Pauline was obliged in all haste to quit her exposed resting place and hurry into the shelter of the adjacent pine wood. For this time the rain, no longer restrained by contrary influences, came down in a perfect deluge of water, flooding the common outside, and sending hundreds of shining rills through the devious paths of the woods where Pauline had taken refuge.

For two or three hours this fearful rain continued to fall with remorseless fury, making any exit from the wood impossible, and meantime darkness came on apace, covering up the narrow valley and the hills, and

Pauline could presently distinguish the reddish stems of the young pines which, washed with this sudden downpour, glistened ruddily in the surrounding gloom. She fancied once that she caught the glimmer of a light, evidently shaded from public view, shining through the trees, in the Fedeles' chalet ; but she could not feel certain that she had seen it, as constantly-recurring flashes of steely lightning had almost benumbed the acuteness of her vision. Dripping from head to foot, shuddering with nervousness, and with a heart whose blackness might have vied with the gloom around her, Pauline at length moved out from the darkness of the wood and took the pathway towards the high road.

A yearning desire, a growing hope that perhaps Pierre might have returned to his home, gave her courage to pursue her journey in a storm worse than that from which she had shrunk so abjectly in the morning. The village streets were flooded ankle-deep, not a soul was stirring in the place, and only the dogs yelped crossly as they heard the passing footfall of the weary and heartbroken woman. At length she reached her own door, but paused at the gateway, seeking courage to enter and face the disappointment and cruel loneliness she felt sure awaited her. The river opposite, across which she had gazed so yearningly in the morning, was now a roaring torrent ; the woods were of an inky blackness, and in the clamour of the storm she fancied that she heard voices shrieking to her for help and rescue. She leaned her head down on the wooden coping of the gateway, and sobbed in her helpless misery.

It was no use to enter the lonely house—she *knew* he was in the forest yonder ; but as she drew one long

and hesitating breath, questioning herself whether she had bodily strength or courage left to venture out alone with that great darkness opposite, or what friend she could call upon for assistance, she heard a long low moan in the direction of the châlet, followed by a distinct sob and a cry of pain.

The sounds surely issued from her own house. She turned and listened. Yes, there was some one within in the châlet, that was certain, and that one was evidently in distress either of mind or body. Could it be that Pierre had returned cruelly injured by some wild beast of the woods, or perhaps even wounded unto death, as his father had been before him?

Pauline's feet could scarcely carry her to the door of her house. It was open—a fresh proof that some one had already entered; so, covering nervously her eyes with her hand, she turned into the kitchen, from which issued only too distinctly the sounds of pain and deep distress. This door was also ajar, but Pauline pushed it wider apart and paused on the threshold. Then the astonished words, “Christine! you here!” issued from her parted lips, and terror, suspense, and amazement swept through her excited brain, as by the dim light within she recognised a cloaked figure sitting in a crouching posture by the kitchen table.

“Christine!” she cried again, “what brings thee here? and where is my son?” But it was not the voice of Christine which replied to her cry of fear, nor was the pleading, pitiful face now raised to meet her at all in keeping with the haggard visage of the hunted woman.

“Pauline! Pauline! my dear friend, it is I,” cried

a low, plaintive voice, the voice of one she loved, and which she had waited all the day to hear, and, quickly withdrawing her hands from her face, Pauline hurried across the kitchen.

"Marie, dear heart, what aileth thee?" Then, in a tone changed and deepened to horror and distress, "Marie, what has happened? art thou hurt?" for, as her eyes grew more accustomed to the light shed by the dim and feeble rushlight burning on the table, Pauline perceived, to her dismay, that Marie's snowy kerchief, which had fallen from the cloak she had previously worn, was spotted with blood, and that her face, too, was scratched and bruised, while the arm which rested on the table beside her, and which was covered over lightly with a cloth, appeared either torn or wounded, as dull crimson stains were visible on the linen which hid it momentarily from her view.

"Marie! Marie! what has happened?" cried Pauline, with parched lips and eyes full of a questioning horror.

"Ah, do not fret; it is not much, good Pauline; only I am so weary and faint. I am resting here; I durst not return as I am," moaned Marie. "If Fedele saw all these blood-stains and bruises, he would go forth to meet them and slay them in his fury."

"They! Whom?" asked Pauline, eagerly.

"Ah, what matters it? They did not do it purposely," replied Marie, wearily. "They chased me, and I fell; fell down a high rock into a great clump of thorny furze, and so I escaped with only these bruises and tears. They will be nothing when the blood is washed away; nothing, I assure thee."

"Nothing! my angel," repeated Pauline. "In heaven's name, canst thou not say who did it?"

"Ah! do not ask me!" cried Marie, "it was my own fault. And willingly would I do it again could I but save those I love."

"Ah!" cried Pauline, with a sudden gasp of pain; "I see it all now; thou needst add no more. Pierre and Antoine, they have done it! Yes, they have done it!"

"Pauline, thou must listen a moment before thou condemnest them, thy son and mine. Early, early this morning they surprised us, Christine, Paul, and myself, in Delemont's cottage, where I had flown on to give them warning; but, with all my haste, I was only a few minutes in advance of them, and had barely time to snatch Christine's cloak from her and wrap it round me to divert their attention, before they were upon us. This trick succeeded, perhaps too well, for, once having caught sight of me in the garden, they gave chase in cruel earnest. I fled quickly down the slope towards the river, doubling a little here and there, so as to give more time to Christine to escape; but, looking back a moment to measure my distance, I saw one of them in the act of raising a gun to fire at me. Ah! I thought my last hour had come; but, God be praised, I escaped unhurt, for at the moment I discovered my danger I was standing on the top of a high rock, slippery with moss and lichen, and, whether through my great terror or at the sound of the gun being fired I cannot say, I suddenly lost my footing, and, sliding down the rock with great rapidity, I fell headlong into a furze-bush beneath, which closed over me so suddenly and securely that I was completely hidden from their sight, and all their efforts afterwards to discover me must have been fruitless."

"Demons!" cried Pauline, striking her hand

passionately on the table. "Cowardly demons, to hunt a helpless creature thus!"

"Hush, hush, that is enough. There is one I blame even more than Pierre. Let us not judge too hastily. I must ask thee now for a little water to wash the blood from these wounds. The skin, you will see, has all been torn from my shoulder and elbow," and Marie pointed to her right arm, which bore evident tokens of having suffered a most severe injury; "and if, also, dear friend, thou couldst lend me a clean kerchief, I would thank thee, for I could not appear before Sebastiano in such a plight."

Pauline hastened to procure the warm water and neckerchief which Marie needed; and when the scratches had been bathed, and the fresh white linen folded over her shoulders and breast, Marie looked sufficiently well to escape the immediate scrutiny of her neighbours, who, when they heard of her return, were sure to congregate around her and assail her with difficult and probably unanswerable questions.

Pauline pressed her friend to stay awhile longer and recruit herself with some wine and bread; and Marie was so faint, she almost consented to the suggestion; but when she heard of the serious illness of the old chef at the inn, and his longing desire to speak with her before his death, she rose instantly, and she went out again into the wind and rain, and, trying to stifle her convulsive sobs, pushed straight for the inn where the old chef lay dying.

CHAPTER XXIII.

WHO IS THAT FIGURE?

TO understand the events of the last chapter, we must return to the brow of the hill on which we left Antoine and Pierre in the early morning, when the sun had temporarily withdrawn under a cloud, and a chilling gloom had fallen over both their hearts.

Antoine was the first, apparently, to recover himself, for, being naturally of a less reflective character, his attention was called off from his own thoughts by the strange pallor of his companion's face, and the air of dejection which for the moment seemed to have completely mastered him.

"What ails thee, old fellow?" he asked, as cheerily as he himself could summon spirit to speak. "Does the day look a little too threatening for thy purpose, or what?"

"The day looks bad enough," replied Pierre, gloomily, "and there is something in the air that chokes me; but that must not deter us from our enterprise. This wavering spirit is destruction to all energy, and is fatal to the object we have in view."

"Who is wavering?" asked Antoine, though his heart belied him as he implied his own willingness to go forward.

"Thou art wavering, and I am also," replied Pierre, quickly, "because thy heart is not in the matter, and I—because—sometimes, like Balaam, I fancy I see an angel with a drawn sword standing in my path, who

will not allow me to push on ; but this," cried Pierre, leaping suddenly to his feet, "is all an imagination. It is so easy to fancy one sees what is for ever in one's mind. But this I swear, the child shall not be injured. I swear it before heaven," he added, vehemently, "that Paul shall not suffer, for Angela loved him, and that is enough ; but Christine, she shall perish ! that I am resolved upon, and nothing shall move me from my purpose, not even an angel with a drawn sword ! Come, let us not delay further."

Antoine rose from the ground at Pierre's bidding, but his eyes seemed to be covertly fixed on some object or point of interest in the valley below.

"What art thou gazing at so earnestly, my friend ?" asked Pierre, curiously. "Dost thou, too, see an angel standing between thee and thy goal ?" And Pierre laughed somewhat bitterly to himself ; then he added, sharply, "Come, out with it now ; thou hast seen something down yonder, on the hill-side, which thou wouldst hide from me."

"I was only looking in the direction of Delemont's cottage," replied Antoine, sullenly.

"And, thou sawest ?"

Pierre stood still a moment, while a rush of some overpowering excitement seemed to pass over his soul.

"Thou sawest her, Christine, that she-wolf moving down there."

"I did not," replied Antoine ; but there was an evasive restlessness in his eyes.

"On thy soul, Antoine ?"

"I will not swear by such an oath."

"On thine honour, then ?"

"Aye, on mine honour."

"But thou sawest something which disturbed thee. That thou canst not deny."

"It is possible."

"I will not have such fencing with the truth," cried Pierre furiously; "either thou art with me or thou art against me. Is it thy belief that at this moment Christine is in hiding in yonder hornet's nest? Answer me, yes or no?"

"I say again, it is possible, but I have not seen her."

"Thou knowest that she constantly resorts to the Count's cottage, and also the why and the wherefore of her visits. Thou needst not deny this. I have a higher authority than thine for my assertion."

"I do not deny it, though I say again I have never seen her there."

"Then thy mother has, and that is enough for me. But stay, I can see for myself the smoke curling up from the cottage chimney. Now indeed is the moment for action. Come, snatch up thy knapsack, we must descend the hill with all speed and secrecy. Here, Wolf, to heel."

Pierre's eyes blazed with excitement, his hands trembled as he grasped his gun, and felt feverishly at his side to make sure that the sickle, hung in his belt, was safe.

"Down, Wolf, down, silence, you cur!" he cried, almost savagely as the dog, whom he had lately so unjustly beaten, now conscious by its master's face of some reaction of pleasurable excitement, leaped upon Pierre, and barked hoarsely in the fulness of its joy.

Once again the butt-end of Pierre's gun descended on his guiltless head. "There is not a living thing on this earth," cried Pierre, white with wrath, "that does

not seek in some manner to foil me. To heel, brute that thou art, and keep thy mouth shut."

The dog which lay fawning at its master's feet, looking for a glance of forgiveness, now slunk miserably into the rear, and in utter silence and at almost a precipitate pace, the two young men descended the rocky sides of the ravine.

Only once Pierre paused, of his own accord, to place his gun temporarily on half-cock, for the yellow moss was in some places slippery as glass, and it was with difficulty they could hold their footing.

It soon, however, became apparent that they had need to be cautious in other matters as well, for the veil of chestnut and pine trees which had, so far, helped to cover their descent, if indeed at that early hour there were any wakeful or watchful eyes in the valley, was now becoming sparse, and they were often obliged to creep behind rocks and to slide down the more exposed places on their hands and knees, so as to avoid observation.

This was most fatiguing work, especially as the dog had also to be concealed from view, and Pierre, forcing it to crouch upon the ground, had to drag it, greatly against its will, on all fours down the hill. The oppressiveness of the air, too, became more noticeable in the valley, and Pierre found his knees trembling beneath him, when, having reached the foot of the last slippery height, he stood for a moment to take breath, and place his gun once more in readiness.

They were now within quite a short distance of Alexandre Delemont's former home, though, from the place where they had halted, it was hidden from their sight, being surrounded by trees and overgrown garden shrubs. But between it and them there rushed the

foaming torrent which must be crossed, and at this point there was only a frail bridge, composed of rough pine logs laid side by side, to which no handrail was attached, and which, except for the sure-footed and hard-headed, was undoubtedly a somewhat perilous mode of passage.

Pierre was forced to rest for a few minutes before crossing over to the opposite side, for his ankle, which he had sprained so many months before, ached keenly from the rapid descent of the mountain, and he felt for the moment sick and faint.

"Fetch me a drop of water from the river, that is a good lad," he said to Antoine, "this stifling air parches one's lips."

Antoine took a small horn goblet from his hunting belt, and went down to the side of the torrent ; the dog, whose existence Pierre had for the moment forgotten, followed him.

Antoine had to walk some little distance down the bank before he could find a spot where it was possible to fill the goblet, for the water rushed swirling on over huge boulders of rock, and the edge of the bank was in most places precipitous, and with only a rare spot here and there for descent.

He moved forward, however, without hesitation. He turned sharply off to the left, and descended the bank close by the bridge, where a bend in the river brought a portion of the valley and hillside into view. Here he stooped, and, holding on by a young sapling, which grew in the earth beside him, he filled the goblet, and having drunk eagerly himself, proceeded to replenish it, but as he leaned over the water, and had just plunged the cup in for the second time, Wolf, who had followed him unperceived, and was standing on

the edge of the bank overhead, suddenly uttered a hoarse bark of anger and recognition, and rushed forward in the direction of the bridge.

The goblet fell from Antoine's hand into the water. He swung himself up with perilous haste to the earth above, and called to the dog in bated, angry tones ; but the noise of the rushing water drowned his voice, and already Wolf was out of sight as well as hearing.

"In truth, but this is a bad business ! how shall I go back and meet Pierre ?" cried Antoine, standing aghast by the river's side. "And the goblet, too, is lost. He is in that mood this morning that, if I angered him, he would kill me for a trifle. At all hazards I must fetch back the dog. Stay ! there he is, I see him ; he is evidently pursuing something. If I could only see. Yes, there it is, a woman, she is running ever so fast. She is making, I am certain, for the bridge. Ah, now if I can only get down to the bank quickly enough, I shall catch a sight of her, and know who she is."

Antoine seized the ash twig, and once more let himself down over the water's edge ; but in his blind haste he slipped, and before he could recover his standing ground, the figure had crossed the narrow bridge, and only the dog, following swiftly on her trail, showed him that his surmises were correct.

It needed, however, no second glance to know who the woman was. Antoine had seen her already from the brow of the hill, descending with swift steps a precipitous path towards the river. He had watched, with a cruel dread, lest Pierre's searching glances should light upon her too. Now she had crossed the bridge in safety, and Antoine knew the dog would not hurt her. But what was to come next ? This was the question which blanched his face, as, swinging himself

up to *terra firma* again, he suddenly encountered Pierre coming forward to meet him.

"Where is the dog, and where is the water I sent you for?"

"The goblet has fallen into the river, and the dog has made off across the bridge into the wood. I called to him, as loud as I durst, to return, but I might as well have cried to the dead. In the first place he could not hear me for the noise of the river, and in the second place he would not have heeded me, had I cried with the voice of a thousand voices."

"Why so?"

"He seemed to be giving chase to something, or some one."

"To what, or whom?"

"It appeared to me like a woman's figure."

"A woman's figure! and we are standing here idly when our quarry is, one may say, actually in sight. Let us cross the bridge at once, and follow after the dog. Wolf will not play us false, whoever else may," cried Pierre, angrily; "if he succeeds in running her to earth, she must needs wait until we come."

They did not take long to reach the bridge. Pierre seemed to have lost all his weakness and indecision, and strode forward with no uncertain step. The fact that the dog was now in hot pursuit of his prey left him no choice of action. The alarm had been given, and he must follow it up or lose all.

Once, for a moment, before he put his foot on the logs which crossed the torrent, he hesitated and paused, while he searched eagerly within the bosom of his jerkin for the charm without which he durst not enter on this otherwise unequal fight. He must have been satisfied of its safety, for with a glance of triumph he

advanced steadily on the bridge, and keeping his eyes averted from the swift-flowing waters beneath his feet, he reached the other side in safety.

Antoine followed close behind. To him the pine logs were as secure a crossing as the Pont d'Esprit in the town of Protogno. He and his flocks had many such rough bridges to cross in their daily walks; nevertheless, his knees smote weakly together, and it was with difficulty he could follow Pierre in the steep clamber which was necessary to gain the path which led direct to the Delemonts' cottage.

This path led first through the base of the pine forest, and then across a strip of meadow land, dotted with fallen rocks, to the garden of the cottage; the same meadow where Pierre's father had been working on that fatal day when, seeking to save little Paul's life, he had lost his own. Once out of the cover of the wood, Pierre knew it would be impossible to conceal their approach any longer from those within the house or garden, for the field sloped down somewhat towards it, and there was only an occasional grey slab of stone behind which they could creep for concealment, so, once more looking well to the priming of his gun, and taking a hasty glance at his companion's face, he strode on, silent, resolute, and stern.

Not a leaf was stirring amongst the forest trees: a thick blackness was creeping over the sky, and in order to breathe more freely, Pierre had to loosen the kerchief at his neck.

"When we reach the meadow, we must make a dash for it," he said, presently, "no hesitation, no parleying with conscience, no pity. In that very garden she took my father's life, and in it I shall take hers, so help me heaven."

They were on the edge of the wood now, and as Pierre spoke, he looked up towards the heaven to which he appealed so constantly, and yet whose existence he was always so eager to deny, and, gazing at it intently for a moment, withdrew his eyes with a sudden start of fear, as a bright flash shot from out the inky cloud opposite, followed by a clap of thunder which, though distant, reverberated ominously from hill to hill.

Pierre turned and looked at Antoine, and, in the pause which followed the noise of the thunder, they both heard distinctly the hoarse bark of the dog close by the cottage garden, and, immediately following upon it, a piercing cry.

A cry so full of mortal anguish that the very air on which it rose seemed to writhe in sympathy.

Pierre and Antoine both instinctively advanced into the meadow and listened, but there was no repetition. It seemed as if a life-time of fear and pain had been gathered up into that one cry of agony which sufficed without further effort to express the extreme of suffering.

"That was Paul's voice, the dog has hurt him," cried Antoine, losing all constraint over his feelings. "Is it not brutal to hunt a poor child thus? Call to it for mercy's sake, and let us turn back before we have murder added to all our other sins."

"Turn back!" repeated Pierre, in a suppressed tone of the most painful excitement. "Nay, that at least I will not do, neither shalt thou. If I am to suffer for one murder, I need not shrink from adding another to my list. Come on, Antoine, and stir up thy coward soul. Follow me," he cried. "Remember all that hangs on thy fidelity."

And Antoine followed him.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"COWARD! WHAT ART THOU AFRAID OF?"

"CONFUSION! but this has been a botched business," cried Pierre, bitterly, as, returning from a strict search through the Delemonts' cottage, he stood gloomily in the doorway, leaning on his gun. "How between us we managed to let them both escape is something to marvel at. I saw Christine with my own eyes go in at this very door. I tracked her to the house as a weasel would a rabbit into its burrow. I followed the very sound of her steps, first up and then down those accursed cross-grained staircases, with my gun ready cocked to bring her down, and my sickle at my side to tear out her wolfish heart at a moment's notice; but when I got to the foot of the stairs she was gone. You swear, Antoine, that she did not escape through the side door yonder?"

"I swear," replied Antoine, decisively.

"And I equally swear that she did not escape through the front of the house, for though I was a couple of paces in her rear she could not have crossed the vestibule without passing directly under my eyes. How, also, she could have flown so fast with the child in her arms is to me a mystery, for her steps sounded in advance of me as swift and as light as a greyhound's. Can they have any secret dens or hiding holes about the place I wonder, eh, Antoine? You ought to be able to answer that question," cried Pierre, turning a swift and burning glance on his companion's face.

But Antoine, whose eyes had been fixed for the last few moments on some spot low down by the rhododendron hedge, either startled by the suddenness of the demand or by its nature, did not answer. He only coloured violently, and looked around him in a confused and helpless manner.

"Antoine, I verily believe thou art as black a traitor as ever lived, and art playing me false at every step," cried Pierre, his eyes gleaming with sudden passion as he noticed the furtive glances of his companion.

"I am no traitor," replied Antoine, in a strange unnatural voice; "but—but I fancied I saw a face somewhere in the garden."

"A face!" cried Pierre, gazing at Antoine in sudden amazement. "Why, what ails thee? I believe verily thou art thyself bewitched," for Antoine was white as death and trembling so that he leaned against the cottage wall for support. "Whose was the face, answer me, and where didst thou see it?"

"The dress was Christine's," replied Antoine, drily, "but the face was that——"

"Of an angel," put in Pierre, bitterly.

"Aye, if thou wilt have it so."

Pierre was about to reply in an excess of rage, when there was a sudden rustle of leaves in a rhododendron bush not far off. The branches moved from side to side, and the leaves trembled ominously:

Pierre raised his gun to the level of his sight and pointed it in the direction of the shrub.

"Stop a moment!" cried Antoine, "let me run first and see who is there. I tell thee it is not Christine, I saw the face, it was not hers. I swear to thee it is not Christine."

"I do not care for thy oaths, I will fire. Out of my way, thou cowardly hound."

Antoine moved a little aside, but there was a look in his eyes at which even Pierre might have hesitated had he taken note of it.

"Farther, move farther away, or I will fire through thy body. No power of heaven or earth shall rob me now of my vengeance."

As Pierre spoke he raised his finger and released the trigger.

Antoine threw up his arms with a loud, despairing cry.

But the flash and clamour of the charge were the only results that followed. A stronger force than Antoine's had interposed to stop the murderous hand, and the shot fell harmlessly upon the gravelled pathway of the garden. Pierre staggered back and leaned once more against the doorway, for, even as the vain boast he had uttered had passed his lips, the sky opposite had opened, as if in response to his challenge, and a fiery snake issuing forth had hissed across the inky sky, followed by a crash of thunder which seemed to shake the very earth on which they stood, and which caused the gun, just as the hammer fell, to jerk suddenly upwards in Pierre's grasp, so that the charge, directed aimlessly towards heaven, fell as harmlessly back upon the earth.

Pierre turned on Antoine a scared and pallid face. "Everything in earth and heaven is against me," he said dejectedly; "who can fight against such odds, but Janette shall give an account to me for all these failures;" and even as he spoke, a figure enveloped in a large cloak rose up suddenly from among the rhododendrons opposite, and, making a dart down the path,

fled precipitately towards a gap in the hedge, through which it disappeared.

"Christine!" ejaculated Pierre, leaping forward from the doorway of the cottage, with flashing eyes and white lips, "this is better luck than I hoped for; if only the gun were charged. Antoine, do thou give chase while I reload it. My limbs and hands shake, so I am as useless as an infant. Quick, I say, do not stop to speculate, or she will have gained some witch's hole to hide in."

Antoine sprang to his feet, flew down the garden path, and, vaulting the hedge, saw the cloaked figure still making good its escape towards the river. No chamois ever ran faster, no daintier feet ever touched the earth than those which fled so nimbly down the bank.

"Stop," cried Antoine, breathlessly, "listen, listen to me! If thou runnest so madly on, thou wilt be shot down, mother."

It was all in vain. The figure had by this time gained the edge of a precipitous bank, which hung almost perpendicularly over the river. There was no course left for it now to pursue, save to try a dangerous leap with the perilous, nay almost certain, result of a plunge into the fast-flowing torrent beneath, or to turn back and meet its pursuers face to face.

"Mother, mother," cried Antoine, in a tone of utmost agony, "stop, for the love of God!"

The woman paused. The cloak which had hitherto flowed loosely behind her, she now gathered tightly, then for one instant, as if in answer to Antoine's appeal, she turned her head and looked into his face appealingly, but catching sight of the second figure standing on the ridge above her, with his arm



"SHE MOVED SUDDENLY FORWARD, AND WITH THE REPORT OF THE GUN . . . SHE DISAPPEARED" (p. 277).

raised; and the gun pointed towards her in only too sure a line, she moved suddenly forward, and with the report of the gun which rang out from the brow of the hill, she disappeared like a flash over the edge of the precipice, and was lost completely to Antoine's sight.

Both now hurried down the slope, but how different were the expressions on these two excited faces, as, sliding down a steep and slippery bank, they paused a moment side by side, ere they turned the corner which must bring the cloaked figure into view.

Antoine, who had been close upon the woman's heels at the moment of her disappearance, was the first by some moments to reach the river's bank; yet even now when Pierre, with giant strides and flaming eyes, came up to him, he had not summoned up his courage to look round the corner of the high rock, which, like a wall (save for a few feet of white sand and thick furze bush), descended almost perpendicularly into the river.

Pierre placed his hand on Antoine's shoulder, and, pushing him somewhat roughly aside, was the first to turn the angle.

"Coward! what art thou afraid of?" he said as he brushed past him. Then coming into full view of the ground beneath the rock, he exclaimed passionately, "By heavens! if she has not vanished again! Who will deny now that this vile woman is a witch?"

"She is not dead, then?" gasped Antoine, who, despite the cutting remarks of his friend, had not yet summoned sufficient courage to look around him.

"Dead! I would she were hanged, drawn, and quartered!" muttered Pierre, between his set teeth; "but she is a deal too black a wretch to die so easily.

Where is she gone?" he turned furiously to Antoine. "Answer me. You have each time had the advantage of me, and each time you have allowed her to escape."

"I! why how, think you, could *I* have aught to say to her escape. You saw the woman with your own eyes disappear suddenly from this rock, and as sure as heaven is above us, I made certain of finding her dead body beneath it."

"She may have fallen into the depths of yon furze bush, and now lie concealed there from our sight. At any rate, we will make that matter sure; I will reload my gun and fire clean into it."

"What folly!" muttered Antoine, sullenly. "Why, even a weasel could scarcely squeeze itself into such a thicket!" and Antoine kicked the furze bush with his own tipped boot, from which a cloud of peach-scented yellow dust flew out into Pierre's eyes, but only Antoine heard, or fancied that he heard, a low, faint moan which issued from its thorny depths.

"Confusion! if I have not dropped my powder-flask on the way!" cried Pierre, stamping impatiently on the ground. "It is like my luck. I must toil up the hill again in search of it. But see, Antoine, what an awful storm is going to burst over our heads! It is useless while it lasts to strive against such wretches. Shall we return to the cottage?"

"I am prepared to do exactly as thou wishest," replied Antoine.

"Well, then, let us shake hands, and have an end to all these foolish fallings out. Thou wilt stick by me to the bitter end, Antoine?"

"Aye, aye; have I not done so already?"

Pierre wrung Antoine's hand and gazed a moment

inquiringly into his face, which was white as death itself, and together they turned out of the narrow cove and breasted the hill side by side.

"If only we knew what had become of that vile witch," muttered Pierre, as, searching amongst the rocks, he stooped to pick up the flask which had fallen on a patch of soft golden moss; "but hush! wait a moment! I heard a strange noise up by the cottage! I am certain, too, I see something moving up there!"

"So do I!" exclaimed Antoine, excitedly; "it is Wolf."

Pierre looked up hastily, and saw that the dog was slowly descending the hill to meet them, not leaping from rock to rock with its usual joyous movements, but crouching and dragging its body along the ground, with puckered tail and drooping eyes.

"What ails it?" asked Pierre, curiously. "What has it round its neck? See! they have sought to fasten it up with some leather strap, which it has broken."

"Nay, but what has it in its mouth?" again cried Antoine, his eyes dilating, while, as the dog drew nearer, horror crept into his eyes, and his face became suffused with a deep flush of pain.

"Here, good dog; what hast thou in thy mouth? Drop it, good friend."

But the dog crawled even slower and slower till it reached its master's feet; then, in obedience to his commands, it opened its huge jaws and let fall upon the ground, with an expression of shame in its solemn upturned eyes, which Antoine could never forget to his last day, a child's white sock, torn and stained with blood.

CHAPTER XXV.

A DESPERATE MISTAKE.

FOR a considerable time after his return to the Delemonts' cottage, Pierre seemed uncertain what course to pursue. The storm was ever on the increase, and the aspect of the heavens grew momentarily worse. Thunder rolled almost continuously amongst the mountains, and now and again a clap more awful than any that preceded it would crash with a brazen uproar over their very heads, while every rock and crag on the mountain side reverberated noisily, but as yet there had been no rain.

Pierre walked restlessly to and fro, sometimes entering the cottage, and searching its precincts with a suspicious zeal, then gazing from the upper windows down towards the river's edge, but always returning to Antoine, who sat below in the garden, with the same expression of his thoughts: "If only the rain would come down, then one's brain might cool, and one could at least think. I am quite uncertain what is best to do. At one moment it seems wisest to me to remain here, in case that woman were still lurking by the river. Again, one must remember the dog came from quite an opposite direction, and had evidently overtaken one of them; at a distance, too, as one could tell from its panting. Antoine, couldst not thou advise me?" But Antoine seemed as much stupefied and unable to reason as Pierre himself.

"It is possible that she may have made her escape by

some short cut into the forest. The river, you know, takes a bend in that direction?" suggested Pierre.

"I feel convinced that she is not down yonder," replied Antoine, decisively, "but whether to press forward into the wood, in face of such a storm, is another thing. It is for you, my friend, to decide on your movements."

"And I have decided on them. We will go forward now, without any more delay or questioning. Wolf shall be our guide, and we will follow blindly where he leads. There, take up your knapsack, and let us hasten on."

Antoine lifted his knapsack from the weedy path, and stood up, while Pierre looked to the priming of his gun. Both their faces were pale, and they were fatigued and harassed. The fire of excitement had died out of Pierre's eyes, but in its place had come a dogged resolution. It was evident he would go on to the end, so side by side they walked through the broken gate of the garden, and passed into the shadow of the pines.

For some distance the path they followed was fairly open and broad. It led sometimes down through the wood to the river, and then again up the steep side of the hill; the slight breeze produced by the swift rush of the torrent, which in this locality was narrow and deep, refreshed Pierre, and gave moments of fresh vigour to his mind, but when he returned into the thickness of the wood, and the thunder muttered and growled overhead, his new-found energy seemed to vanish, and he pushed forward with an evident effort, both of mind and body. Once he stopped, and, looking Antoine full in the face, he said,

"Thou knowest at least, to a certainty, that

Christine's den is somewhere within, or immediately beyond, this accursed wood."

"I know nothing," replied Antoine, doggedly. "I have said so a thousand times."

"Well, well, it is all the same ; thy mother knows it, and the dog knows it. Thy ignorance will be no safeguard to the guilty. This storm cannot last for ever, and if I search till every tree in the forest is a scorched and blackened stump, I will hunt that fiend to her den, and from me she shall obtain scant pity."

The dog seemed perfectly to understand the importance of his position, and the gravity of the charge which had been committed to him. He kept always in advance, with his nose close to the ground, at first at a slow trot, searching the broad-leaved ferns full of their pungent aroma, and the mosses, redolent of wild mountain turf, but as he advanced farther into the wood, his eyes, sparkling with excitement, seemed to search alike all the elements, the earth, the sky, the air ; and low growls, long pauses, and a coat on which each successive hair stood up in bristling watchfulness, warned Pierre when to keep his gun in readiness for instant action, and Antoine, who now held the fatal sickle in his hand, also kept a tight grasp on his weapon, for there were more wolves in this forest than the cruel were-wolf which had slain Pierre's father, and even the bears, which lived in the high recesses of the mountains, had been known to come down out of their lairs in such stress of weather.

It was an essentially tiring walk, especially with a heavy gun, which one must carry skilfully so as to avoid entangling any part of it in the loose growth of the forest. Pierre, whose injured ankle always came against him in long expeditions, dragged

his limbs, and sighed wearily, as each fresh ascent became necessary.

Overhead, too, all seemed blackness. The storm was reaching its culminating point, and the long-threatened rain could not be far off.

"Antoine, hast thou any wine in thy wallet?" cried Pierre at last, as the dog made another upward track right over a sharp spur of the wooded hill; "my tongue and lips are as dry as leather, and I feel as weak as a baby released from its mother's apron-strings."

"I have no wine; I have some bread, but not much."

"I told thee to put food and drink in thy knapsack," cried Pierre, reproachfully, "and now, at the critical moment, thou hast failed me."

"I never dreamt but that we should find water to quench our thirst with. If thou wilt remain here awhile I will see if I cannot find a short cut to the river."

"The river!" exclaimed Pierre, despondingly, "why, that is at least a mile beneath us. Nay, give us something to eat, and when the storm breaks we shall have water, if only the rain will come," sighed Pierre for the hundredth time; "then indeed we could breathe and bestir ourselves. This dreadful sulphurous smell is stifling, and the rattle of the thunder is always in one's ears. Is that all the bread thou hast?" cried he, aghast, as Antoine produced from his wallet a cake of oaten meal which even a child would have found insufficient for a hearty meal.

"Aye, that is all. Mother refused to give me provision for the journey, and this cake I snatched from the little one's bed as I passed through the room at night."

"Thy mother shall answer to me for this, some day!" cried Pierre, bitterly. "What is that crumb of food between two people?"

"Not much; but what there is thou art welcome to. It would choke me now; only make haste and eat it, for, bear in mind that while thou delayest thus, the dog is out of sight, and we must push on and overtake him, or we shall be stranded here in right earnest," cried Antoine, anxiously.

"If the dog be eternally out of sight and lost, I care not. I must rest. My ankle stings like a scorpion. Let us sit down under the tree, and draw one full breath into our lungs. We shall overtake Wolf, never fear, when we are rested;" and Pierre, evidently worn out with fatigue, sank down with a groan upon the earth.

"Let me speak now for the last time," cried Antoine, gazing at Pierre with eyes full of the liveliest distress. "Were it not better even now, at this late hour, for us to return? Thou art exhausted and famished, and we have neither drink nor food, nor can we even frame a thought how near we are to our journey's end. Call back the dog, and let us turn again towards the village."

"No," replied Pierre, doggedly; "I have sworn an oath from which I will not retract, and if I have to pass the night in hunger, or, still worse, to confront for hours thy pitiful countenance, all puckered with tears and cowardly alarms, I will still go on, nor rest satisfied till I have come face to face with that vile woman and settled my long account with her. I have been baulked of that pleasure once too often, and not all the powers of earth or heaven shall cheat me of it now."

At this moment, while Antoine stood open-mouthed and aghast at Pierre's impious words, a sudden steely light shot downwards through the trees, causing every corner and leafy branch of the forest to start out suddenly with a brilliant and fearful relief. There was a groan from Pierre, and then a crack of such fearful import that the earth seemed literally to reel, as if smitten against some opposing planet, and a sound followed as if mountains were crashing down simultaneously with an eternal ruin.

Antoine himself was for a moment rendered dizzy and blind by the close passage of the electric fluid, and when he recovered his sight it was only to see the tree at the foot of which Pierre had been seated a few moments before, rent from head to foot, and its bleached and scattered branches lying strewn in jagged fragments on the ground.

Pierre himself was lying motionless at its foot; but as Antoine approached, in an anguish of mind, the spot where he lay, believing him to be dead, he moved, and moaning, raised himself slightly from the ground.

"Ah, what is it?" he asked, "that has come over me? Why dost thou look at me so, Antoine? my hands and my legs tingle as though they had fire racing through them. Thou must help me to rise. Ah, but look at the tree, it is torn in two! It would seem I have had a rare escape!"

"Thank heaven for it!" replied Antoine, with indignant warmth.

"Aye! aye! do thou thank heaven for thyself, and I will reserve my gratitude for the quarter where it is due."

Pierre staggered to his feet as he spoke, but had to catch at Antoine's arm for support. "I shall not

make much way at this pace," he said, bitterly. "I might as well have no limbs for all the use they seem to me. I am reeling about like the drunken old cobbler who threw the stone at Janette. Ah, yes, Mistress Janette, she is cleverer than all the rest of you put together. Only for her I should be dead now. So—so—I shall fall if thou dost not support me." He stumbled as he spoke, and almost precipitated Antoine to the ground. "But what is that?" he cried suddenly, recovering his equilibrium, as once again a bright white flash illumined all around him, and a crash of deafening thunder broke over their very heads. "Antoine! dost thou see? another tree has fallen close beside me! If it were not for Janette we should be dead men now."

"If it were not for Janette we should not be in the jaws of death now!" cried Antoine, angrily. "One thing is clear, however, and that is we must get out of this forest as quickly as we can. There is not a moment to be lost. We must push on there to the right for the open, if, indeed, we shall ever be spared to reach it alive."

"But the dog is gone in the opposite direction, right over the hill. I—I have sworn——"

"Come on! I care not what thou hast sworn! It is not the dog we have to think of now, but our own lives. By-and-by, too, when the darkness gathers, we shall have the wolves down upon us. I have heard their howls in the distance already, and they are no enemies to trifle with."

Pierre allowed himself for a time to be dragged forward unresistingly by his companion. His mind was in a strange confusion, and his eyesight was curiously uncertain. At one time he seemed to him-

self to rise like a giant and walk even with the tops of the trees, and then again he felt like a mere nonentity on the face of the earth, not bigger or steadier than the blades of grass starting out of the moss at his feet.

Sometimes he slipped and fell, and was conscious of being dragged up again by Antoine, whose words of adjuration fell heedlessly on his ears. But presently the rain began to fall, at first a heavy drop descending with a dull thud on the brim of his straw hat, then a hissing amidst the branches overhead and a gradual darkening of the red pine-needles at his feet, and at last rain, rushing loud and furious, which seemed to bear all before it, and which made the earth leap up to meet it.

Pierre felt his breath come easier, his brain grow calmer, his feet steadier as the rain came. He began, with glimpses of reason, to take in the true state of things and the dangers of the moment. He recognised in Antoine's straining eyes, and low muttered words of anguish, as he dragged his arm closer under his own and pressed on feverishly, that they were passing through some great crisis of their lives, and, as each successive flash illumined the wood around them, he clung closer and closer to his friend; nor were his ears too dull to hear the distant howling of the wolves who, distracted by the thunder and the sudden flood of water from above, were prowling restlessly in the upper portion of the forest.

"Is the gun loaded?" asked Pierre, helplessly, for Antoine had found it beneath the stricken tree, and had carried it on his shoulder for an hour back.

"It is not loaded. When one is stumbling and falling at every step, it is safer as it is. Leave that to me, only come on. When we reach the open,

and thou canst keep thy feet, I will give it to thee again."

It took them another hour of toilsome walking before they actually emerged from the straggling edges of the forest upon the bare mountain side, and Pierre was so exhausted that, although the rain was still falling in torrents, he flung himself down under the shelter of the first rock, and lay for a few minutes pale as death, and almost speechless.

"We cannot afford to wait here long," cried Antoine, despairingly; "I hear the wolves clamouring in the woods above. They will soon be upon us. Couldst thou not push on even a few steps farther until we come in sight of some place of shelter? Surely beyond this wood we must find a house, or at least a shepherd's hut, where we can take refuge. If we could only climb to the brow of this hill, on which we are now standing, we should at least get a notion of the surroundings. Dost thou think, Pierre, thou couldst drag thyself so far? I will give thee all the assistance in my power, for indeed it is dangerous to remain here longer."

Pierre gazed up through the gathering gloom at the spot indicated by Antoine, and his spirit failed within him. Were they certain of shelter and rest when once this peak which they were ascending were gained, he might, perhaps, drag himself forward, supported by the strong arm of "Hope," but to move on and up, not knowing where or why he did so, was, he felt at this moment, but a creeping on towards certain death.

"Perhaps if I rested awhile I could manage it," he said, wearily; "but, oh! like a good fellow, fetch me, for mercy's sake, a mouthful of water," and Antoine

noticed, uneasily, a filmy kind of haze stealing over Pierre's usually bright and burning eyes.

"I will go at once and fetch some; with all this rain, water ought to be plentiful enough, and if thou art not afraid of remaining here awhile by thyself, I will make at the same time a hasty dash up the hill, and bring thee back word what there is to be seen or done. Keep up thy heart, man, I shall be in sight all the while," cried Antoine, encouragingly; "this is not such a desert land, but we are likely to catch a glimpse of some habitation, and if once only I had thee in a place of safety I would scour the earth until I brought thee help."

Pierre could not speak; a deadly faintness was over him, but he stretched out his hand gratefully to Antoine, and pressed the fingers which Antoine placed in his.

"If thou art going," he muttered faintly, seeing Antoine's gaze fixed on him irresolutely, "it were best thou went quickly. Have we the gun?"

"But what if thou wert to faint, or grow giddy and roll down this steep and slippery slope."

"Nay, fear not. Anything is better than this uncertainty, and the darkness is falling so fast."

"Aye," replied Antoine, speaking more in answer to his own thoughts, "and if help is to be sought and found, and if needs be that I must even carry him part of the way, there is no time to be lost. Adieu."

Tears were seldom a relief to Pierre, and yet now drops, bitter as gall, and hot as fire, coursed each other down his cheeks, but no blessed calm ensued. The moments of Antoine's absence grew to minutes, and minutes appeared hours of tortured expectation. He pressed his lips upon the damp moss to moisten them,

and longed for the promised draught of cool, clear water, but still the time dragged on. "If only Antoine would return," he murmured feverishly again and again; "if the daylight fails us, we are indeed lost."

He sat up once more impatiently, and gazed at the sky above him; but there was small comfort to be gathered from it, for a more forbidding and sombre pall of darkness seldom stretched itself across the heavens, which, still overflowing with electricity, kept emitting lurid tongues of flame or violet sheets of waving light, while at intervals forks of steely fire cleft the black clouds from end to end, followed by instantaneous and terrifying claps of thunder.

"Janette, thy selection of a day has not been too propitious," he muttered, gloomily; "thou must have seen the stars double, as is thy wont occasionally."

As Pierre spoke he mechanically slipped his hand within his jerkin. The name of Janette had evidently recalled some truant thought, some vision of hope or flash of brief distrust, for over his face there passed in swift succession expressions varying in light and darkness as the clouds above him.

"It is lost, it is gone!" he cried at last, with a sudden bitter cry, as he leaped forwards to his knees and searched eagerly within the breast of his soaked and dragged jerkin. "Yes, yes, it is gone. It is vain to hope; the chain is broken in two, and the charm is lost, and I am undone. Where can it have fallen? Somewhere within the woods. I must, at all hazards, return and search for it. Ah, if Wolf were here he would assist me. Wolf, Wolf, where art thou, my trusty friend?" Pierre drew his dry lips together and sought to summon his favourite, but weak and vain was the effort, still vainer were his attempts to rise;

his limbs were powerless to support him, and a sudden giddiness made the heavens and the earth and rocks sink and rise and fall in one hideous jumble before his eyes.

"When Antoine returns he must help me to find it," he moaned, piteously. "We are both dead men if that be lost. Will he never come back? Yes, now I hear him; he is racing down the hill; ah, so swiftly, I am certain he brings help or hope of some kind."

Pierre sat up; all giddiness was passed now, his eyes, widely dilated, gazed with an earnest expectancy up the jagged hill-side.

A dark object had appeared for a moment on a rock far above his head; there was again a sound of swiftly descending footsteps, and Pierre, recognising a new and terrible danger, turned and stretched out his hand for his gun.

"Yes, now comes Death! The wolves are upon us," he said, between his teeth, then he grasped the weapon firmly in his hand, and waited for his fate.

That the danger was close at hand there could be little doubt. A low snarling and snapping sound was now distinctly audible, and the rushing of some approaching body through clumps of heather and over damp and spongy earth.

"If Antoine were only here!" moaned Pierre. "I have scarcely strength left to draw the trigger. Hush! what is that? He is calling to me; but oh, so far off. It is vain to answer. I shall be a dead man before he returns. Merciful heavens, if there are not two of them close upon me!"

He withdrew instantly into the sharp angle formed by the rock and earth, beneath which he had taken shelter from the storm, and rested the barrel of his

gun upon the edge of the bank in front of him. He was not a moment too soon, for almost before he could steady his gun his enemies were upon him. There was no time to hesitate. Pierre placed his finger on the trigger, and without one glance discharged the contents of the barrel in the direction indicated by the approaching sounds.

A loud howl of pain showed that the shot had taken effect ; and one of his enemies, leaping for a moment high into the air, fell helpless like a stone almost against the very muzzle of his gun ; while the other, either frightened by the sudden flash and report, or hurried onwards by its own impetuous haste, had already leaped the intervening space and rushed headlong down the precipitous hill-side.

Pierre for a few seconds did not dare to move. The dark object which lay stretched right across the entrance of his hiding-place still shuddered and moaned in its agony. The space was too narrow for Pierre to reload his gun, and fearful of betraying his presence by the faintest movement, he lay crouched in a constrained attitude waiting for the silence of death which he felt sure must soon follow upon so grievous a wound.

But death was not yet to give it or Pierre relief. For a few moments the animal lay still, and the moaning sank to almost the quiver of a human sob.

Then all at once a flash of intensely white light cut the heaven open from end to end, and Pierre recognised, with a long and bitter cry, the head that lay across his arm with the face touching his bosom.

It was Wolf, his faithful friend, and it was his hand that had slain him !

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE HAUNTED MILL.

MEANTIME Antoine, anxious to reach a spot where he could obtain water for his comrade, had pushed on with feverish haste. To descend to the brink of the torrent he knew was almost impossible ; the failing light, the steep slopes, and the numerous obstacles which intervened would make such a course not only difficult, but highly dangerous, and time besides was infinitely precious ; so, hoping to come upon some mountain stream rushing downward to the river, he pressed on, stumbling over the slippery moss and rain-drenched heather.

At last, after many a fruitless turn and painful climb, he reached the foot of a sharp and jagged rock, on the brow of which a stream, newly-fed with heavy rain, rushed furiously ; and at the summit of which rock, could he but find strength to scale it, he fancied he might obtain some view of the surrounding country.

In this expectation he was not mistaken, for, having with many and great exertions reached its grass-covered crown, he saw not only the slopes of the mountains immediately beneath, but on the summit of the hill above him he beheld a sight which for a moment scared even his unsuperstitious mind, and made his heart leap as though his body could no longer restrain its bursting efforts to be free.

He remembered no more now Pierre's anguish of

thirst, nor glanced at the brown and turbid stream as it hastened over the sharp edge of the rock beside him. He only recognised, with a sudden instinct of coming danger, that this was the abhorred hill on which he stood, the spot accursed by all the neighbourhood, on whose banned and detested soil no human foot had ever ventured to tread since the death of Madeline L'Estrange.

There could be no mistake about it, no vestige even of a doubt, for on the crest of the hill above him, looking like a wan ghost standing up desolate and forlorn against the inky sky, stood the mill itself, an ominous and portentous sight, with the arm still outstretched stiff and stark into the evening air, and on which Madeline L'Estrange had been hanged.

This was the mill known in the town of Protogno to be haunted. Through its hollow eyes even lately flames had been seen to flash ; Herr Gartmann had borne witness to this fact ; and even now, as Antoine gazed at it with horror, fire seemed to leap forth from the windows.

Antoine fell on his knees and covered his eyes with his hands, uttering a short prayer for help ; but the loud burst of thunder which crashed almost simultaneously overhead made him realise the true cause of his sudden panic, and at the same time a loud and angry howl coming from the edge of the wood forced upon his mind the danger of his position.

"Bah ! why am I such a fool," he cried passionately, "to think of ghosts and hobgoblins when death is at one's very heels ? If we can find no other refuge we must e'en climb yonder ladder and take shelter in the mill itself," groaned Antoine. "If only I can win over Pierre. But hush ! what is that grey thing rushing

down the side of the hill? "If only one had more light. Yes, there it goes, I see it plainly; it is a wolf, and another following quickly behind it! Ah! they are making straight down the hill-side upon Pierre; I must rush at once to his assistance. If only I had the gun I might save him, for it is vain to hope that he can save himself; he is too weak to raise even his hand in his own defence. Pierre, Pierre," shouted Antoine, striving to out-roar the noise of the torrent beside him, "I am coming, do not fear; keep a good heart, but have thy gun in readiness."

Unable to distinguish any responsive cry, Antoine almost flung himself from the rock on which he had been standing, and, leaping over every obstacle, made all speed to reach his friend; but when close upon the spot where he had left him, he heard a loud report of a gun, followed by a sudden howl of pain, and Antoine, in the ever-increasing gloom, fancied he saw one of the wolves he had before observed making swiftly past him down the hill-side, but he could not wait to satisfy his hopes or fears. He felt he must at all hazards reach Pierre's side and seek to rescue him, if necessary; and, with a scared and anxious mind, he clambered hastily over the intervening spur of the hill, not knowing what cruel sight might meet his eyes or what horror the night might still hold for him in its keeping.

When he did climb the last ridge, and with trembling limbs stood upon the heathery slope at the foot of the rock where he had left his companion, he came upon a scene altogether different from that which he had anticipated.

It was too dark to distinguish more than the outlines of objects, even quite close to him; but this he could see, that Pierre was kneeling on the grass in

front of his recent hiding-place, and that his head was pressed closely down upon some dark object which lay on the grass in front of him.

"What has happened, Pierre? Is the beast dead?"

"Oh! I would give all I have in the world to think it lived!"

"How so?"

"It is Wolf that I have shot with my own hand."

"It is not possible!" exclaimed Antoine, anxiously.

"Look well; perhaps it is not dead. Let me see."

"The poor beast must have come out of the wood in hot chase of a wolf, for I heard the rushing footsteps of the pair descending the hill, and I thought the whole pack was upon me; so I held my gun in readiness, prepared to fire. One creature, swift and black as death itself, cleared with a bound the space in front of me, the second fell right at my feet, killed by my gun. Ah, my friend, my friend! what can repay me for thy loss?"

"It is not dead!" said Antoine, rising to his feet; "its heart still beats. Here, let me lift it in my arms, and do thou follow me."

"Where to?" asked Pierre, languidly.

"To a place of shelter. If one remains here on the open heath, with the worst of the storm still to come, we are both dead men."

"Is it far off?"

"A quarter of a mile at most?"

"Must one climb to reach it?"

"Well, yes; a trifle."

"Art thou sure they will not refuse us shelter?"

"Certain."

"Thou hast ascertained, then, our whereabouts?"

"Yes, yes; come on. If it grows darker I shall



“ONE CREATURE . . . CLEARED WITH A BOUND THE SPACE IN FRONT
OF ME; THE SECOND FELL . . . KILLED BY MY GUN” (p. 296).

not easily find the road. Look there! didst thou see yon ball of fire which fell from heaven? It has torn up the very earth in front of us. Do shake off thy cowardly fears and put some mettle in thy steps. Why, this morning thou wert so boastful of thy prowess, the very heavens were not worthy to compete with thee! Where is Janette's charm? why does it not give wings to thy feet and courage to thy heart?"

"It is lost," replied Pierre, gloomily.

"Lost! well, so much the better, say I. I would rather trust to my own limbs and my own muscles any day than to a piece of wrinkled toadskin filled with cats' teeth and other abominations. Ah, a friend of yours once opened one of those, and showed me the contents. She had no faith in such monstrous follies; she wore a fairer charm, more precious to her than rubies; yet she valued it, poor innocent as she was (it was only a little heart carved out of a common peach stone), this foolish charm, though the giver of it had himself a heart of stone."

"He had not!" cried Pierre, striding fiercely on. "How darest thou say so!"

"She said so herself," observed Antoine, coldly.

"Thou liest! dog as thou art!"

"Aye! she did, though! She wept, too, as she said it, hot tears, and plenty of them."

"I gave her no cause for tears. She had my love my whole love, and she knew it."

"It was not for thy love she wept. Thou knowest best whether she valued it or not. It was for thy heart, thy heart of stone, she wept."

"What said she?" asked Pierre, bitterly.

"She said——; but I have no breath to tell thee. This poor beast weighs in my arms like lead."

"What said she?" repeated Pierre, still striding upward, unconscious of the strain upon his exhausted strength.

"She said——what it will perhaps suit thy mood to scoff at."

"Go on!" shouted Pierre, fiercely; "thou needest not to mince and mouth. I shall not scoff at words her lips have uttered."

"She said that it was useless for her to speak to thee. There was One only who could change the heart of stone, and yet thou wouldst not seek Him; and that she prayed God night and day to grant thee this grace, even if she did not live to see it. Here, pause a moment, friend, and take a drink from this pool. We have one sharp tug before us still, and then only a mossy slope to climb."

Antoine filled his cap with water, from the brim of which Pierre drank greedily, though almost unconsciously, so earnestly were his thoughts fixed on other matters.

"Now grasp firmly my arm, and I will drag thee up this rock. It is slippery and treacherous, and if thou plantest thy feet with doubtful tread, all my strength might not serve to keep thee from falling."

"Thou canst not climb such a rock with the dog in thy arms."

"Nay; I will leave him here and then return for him. There is no fear that he will move from the spot where I lay him down; I would there were, poor faithful brute. Hark! he moaned then as I placed him on the earth. He may yet do well."

"God grant it!" ejaculated Pierre, all unconscious of the spoken prayer.

With many a dangerous slip, and pause for breath,

Antoine succeeded in dragging Pierre up the damp and slippery wall of rock, which, stretching right across the shoulder of the mountain, rendered a journey round it impossible in Pierre's weak state.

"Now remain here," cried Antoine, as Pierre sank exhausted on the grass above the rock, 'and draw thy breath freely while I go and fetch the dog. I must place him on my shoulders, for otherwise I could never clamber up. Be patient; I shall not be away long. Ah! what a flash! Cover thy eyes, Pierre, and think of her who loved thee; so the time will pass quickly till my return."

"It is too dark," murmured Antoine to himself, as he descended the face of the cliff, "for him to recognise the country round, if only the lightning does not reveal to him our promised shelter, for then he must know all. What rain! Every drop feels as if it were weighted with lead."

Having refreshed himself with a long drink of the ice-cold water from the torrent, Antoine shouldered the helpless body of the dog, and began his somewhat anxious ascent. With the dead weight across his shoulders, he found it almost impossible to move upwards, and more than once he feared he would have to give up in despair, and let the poor beast, wounded evidently to death, slip from his back into the torrent beneath, where its sufferings would be speedily ended. He paused at last when a ledge of rock, broader than the rest, offered him a safe halting-place, and was shifting the weight on his shoulders into a more easy position, when he heard a cry from the summit of the cliff above him—a sharp cry of agony and fear—and he knew the voice was Pierre's.

Had that last flash of lightning struck him? or had the sight of the ghastly building on the hill smitten him with a still deadlier shaft?

"What is it, comrade? I am close at hand," cried Antoine reassuringly. "Thou hast nought to fear, believe me."

A groan was the only answer, and as Antoine, breathless and trembling in every limb from the exertion of the ascent, reached the summit, he found Pierre lying on his face on the ground like one dead.

"Pierre, what ails thee," cried Antoine, stooping down in the gathering gloom to catch a nearer view of his companion, and touching him softly on his jerkin—"what ails thee, my friend?"

But at the sound of Antoine's voice, at the touch of his hand, Pierre started up suddenly, like one possessed, and turning furiously on him demanded—

"Dog! swine! demon, that thou art! why didst thou bring me here? Dost thou not know that this is the accursed hill whither all who climb are reckoned as dead men; and yonder is the mill, which even to look on is madness. How darest thou bring me here? Answer me, hound that thou art!"

"Thy own feet brought thee to this hill," replied Antoine, apparently unmoved by his companion's fury. "Thy own headstrong will brought thee out on this wild and cruel chase, and now thou wouldst lay the blame on me. However, trouble thyself no farther about me. I will seek the shelter of yonder building, and leave thy craven and ungenerous heart to find a resting-place more suited to itself."

"The mill, the mill! thou wilt seek shelter in the mill!" screamed Pierre, "a spot full of dead men's bones, a witch's charnel house!"

"I have never heard it called so. My mother says such stories are only fables of Janette's."

"Thy mother is a fool."

"Be it so," replied Antoine, in an icy tone. "Shall I leave the dog with thee, or take it with me to the mill?"

"Frau Gartmann saw flames streaming through its windows," cried Pierre, deaf to all else but the present horror of the moment. "I was there when she told them of it. Thou canst not deny that."

"Aye, aye, Frau Gartmann sees many a thing, no doubt, that others may look for in vain. A fire would not be such a bad thing just now to warm one's frozen bodies, and dry one's dripping clothes; but there is no such luck, I fear, awaiting us."

"Thou canst jest thus, and not fear to be torn limb from limb by those thou mockest at!"

"I can," replied Antoine, "and now, since thou art resolved to remain outside all night, I will move on. Farewell! if thy heart fails thee, thou wilt find me yonder; but I doubt if, unless thou callest loud to me, I shall hear thee, for I am tired to death, and sleep may overtake me."

"To sleep on the very breast of hell," groaned Pierre in horror.

Antoine made no answer, but moved forwards, leaving the dog lying on the ground at Pierre's feet.

"Coward, to desert me at such a moment!" cried Pierre, bitterly.

"Coward, to fear to accompany me!" answered Antoine, with equal anger.

"If I had not lost my charm."

"Hadst thou a thousand charms they could not save thee in such weather. If thou remainest where thou art, thou wilt be beaten into pulp by the morning.

I for one can endure such rain no longer," and, not turning again to look at Pierre, Antoine pushed quickly up the ascent leading to the mill.

"He will never have the courage to remain alone. He is sure to follow," he murmured to himself, as he strode up the spongy grass.

In a few minutes Antoine had reached the summit of the hill, and stood beside the mill, whose reputé was so evil, and whose very name was a by-word in the village. It was so dark now he could barely distinguish its black figure against the blackness of the sky. He could only just make out the haggard outline of its extended arms ; while the ladder which led up to the desired shelter, and which he had taken note of when first he beheld it, was now totally undistinguishable.

Antoine walked round the mill to see if there were any aperture in the lower part of the building, through which they could enter in, and thus obtain shelter without making a perilous ascent to the upper chamber, but he could find none.

At one point there was, it is true, an opening or rough doorway cut in the thick stone-work of the mill, into which Antoine almost fell in the darkness, but when he tried to enter in at this cave-like entrance, he found himself opposed by a thick wooden door, against which he pressed in vain, and when he knocked against it there was only a hollow reverberation, a sound as of wild birds startled from their sleep, beating their wings and screaming loudly as they whirled around the interior of the building, but the roar of the storm at this moment was too loud for Antoine to be nice in the distinguishing of sounds.

"I must wait until the next flash reveals the ladder to me," he said, anxiously, for now that he was close

to the wished-for haven, a thousand terrors came rushing over him, and doubts and fears, which all the day he had been striving to keep at bay, rose up to scare him.

But the flash was not long delayed. It came with such a forked fury and glare of unearthly brilliancy that he could see the very beads of rain which dripped from the black arms above him, and it also revealed to him that he was standing at the very foot of the ladder leading up in an almost perpendicular line to a small doorway above, which seemed to give ingress to the upper storey of the mill.

He placed his foot on the damp and slippery steps, while the thunder crashed and roared overhead. It was nervous work, in such a darkness, to mount so precipitous a stair, and with nought, too, to catch hold of for support—for the frail wooden handrail had long ago fallen away from the ladder—and, to mount one must hold on by the steps above.

Antoine, feeling cautiously with his hands, had succeeded in rising a few feet above the ground when he stopped and listened. The thunder had ceased, and he thought he heard a scream, and a voice crying out in some sudden pain or anguish.

Antoine's heart thumped against his side. "It must be Pierre," he ejaculated, "and yet it is not like his voice. It sounded so close to me, almost at my side. He hath followed me, no doubt. That last flash was one likely to bring him to his senses. There again, hark, hark how he cries! what a poltroon to weep like a child, and not advance at once to do what sooner or later he feels in his coward heart he must do. Pierre, Pierre, here I am, close at hand: the ladder is beside me and we shall soon be in shelter.

Come on, my friend ; once in safety you can lie down and rest."

"I am coming," moaned a weary voice, still far from the summit of the hill ; "wait for me, for mercy's sake"

Antoine descended the few steps he had gained on the ladder, and went forward dazed and anxious to meet his companion. He had seemed so close to him a moment before, and now his cry came from a distance ; but he could not pause to hold parley with himself : he must advance boldly, believing that even above so fierce a storm, and amidst such evil surroundings, God's eye was surely upon him.

He found Pierre, almost at the summit of the ascent, breathless, and full of fury.

"Accursed that thou art to leave me to die on the hill-side," he cried, passionately, "and the poor dog too. Who spoke of a heart of stone a moment ago ? Truly, when we return home I shall make thee answer for this night's work."

"Here, give us thy hand, it will be time enough when we do return home to answer for many things," said Antoine gravely ; "and as to the dog, when I have placed thee yonder I will return and fetch him up."

"And leave me in yonder witch's hole alone !"

"It is not to please myself I would forsake thee. It was thy anxiety for the dog which prompted me to make the offer."

"I will not enter that mill without thee," cried Pierre, almost frantic with terror. "Go back now for the dog, and I will wait for thee here. Ah, if I had but my charm I could defy all the fiends in Christendom, but without it what am I ?"

"A fool," replied Antoine, curtly.

"Thou doest well to say so when I have not the strength to silence thee. By heavens! are we so near as this?" as a luminous purple flash suddenly revealed, in a strange, mysterious light, the building, which stood about four paces off, and the long, steep ladder leading up almost to its summit.

Pierre covered his eyes. The sight made him sick. He felt like one in a nightmare. He struggled to call to his companion, but his dry lips made no audible sound. A moment more and he realised that Antoine had left him, that he was alone, with none to protect him. He fell upon his knees, he knew not why, and opening his lips he cried out in a voice of agony—

"Help, help, O my God! I implore Thee, help!"

There was an answer to his cry. Somewhere near him a loud, long cry of pain, intermingled with pity, echoing, as it seemed to him, his very words.

"Mercy! the fiends are mocking me! Antoine, Antoine, return quickly, I cannot remain here alone! Antoine, answer me?"

Again the same long cry of pain, and once again the lightning turned all the surroundings to an amethyst hue.

"Ah! what is that?" cried Pierre, leaping to his feet, as some white-draped figure rushed past him suddenly, almost brushing him with its noiseless garments.

Pierre fled he knew not whither, staggering blindly forward until he struck against the foot of the mill ladder. As he did so he heard Antoine's voice raised imperatively, and close beside him.

"Up," he cried, "make no delay! The wolves are on our track again. I had a breathless run of it, I can tell thee, with this heavy brute in my arms. Now, up

with thee, quickly! What is it? Canst thou not find the ladder? I saw thee a moment ago close beside it."

"Aye, it is near, but I fear to mount alone. If thou wilt help me ——"

"Nay! but I will fling thee to the wolves if thou dost not mount at once! This crazy ladder will not bear the weight of thee and me, and this wretched beast which keeps on moaning so in my arms. Up, I say. If I go up there first I will not return to fetch thee; no, not if thou wert in the very jaws of death!"

"It is dark," groaned Pierre, "I cannot see. I shall surely fall;" but still Antoine heard with secret satisfaction the groaning of the wooden ladder as Pierre, with slow but heavy steps, ascended it.

"That is good; take courage," he cried, reassuringly. "Keep thy eyes shut, lest a sudden flash startle thee, and so thy balance should be lost. I will mount a step or two behind thee to give thee courage. Now, open not thine eyes, for such a flash as that last might scare the bravest climber of the Alps. Thou hast not ten steps more to reach the top. Bravo! I would I were as near as thou to the topmost rung. Call out, good friend, when thou art safely ensconced above."

"I am there now," replied Pierre, with a gasp of relief, as he felt the perilous ascent was safely accomplished; "but I fear to move, lest there may be no footing in front of me, and I may fall into an abyss beneath me."

Antoine did not heed him. He had begun the dangerous climb himself, and, with the heavy weight he carried on his shoulders, and the swaying of the ladder from the strong wind, he found it almost impossible to keep his feet. To him the bright flashes

of lightning were a relief, showing him every now and then his position, except when, once, looking up quickly, they revealed to him the deathly face of Pierre gazing at him from above, and for a moment a pang of some unreasoning pity filled him with pain.

"If the wind blows like this it will cast me to the ground," groaned Antoine, bending close to the rungs of the ladder, as a furious blast came rushing across the hill-top. "Ah, Wolf, if thou and I reach the summit in safety, thou wilt owe me something for my pain. Here, Pierre, quick! stretch forth thy hand; the ladder is lurching beneath me as though it were made of rope! Quick, I say! The dog first —. Mercy! the wood is, I believe, parting beneath my own feet! Pierre, here! catch me by the arms! Thou must drag me up, dog and all. If thou hast any strength, lad, put it forth now. Pierre, Pierre, save me!"

One desperate struggle on both sides, and Antoine found himself clutching firmly at the frame-work of the door, while, a moment later, he knelt breathless on the floor of the mill. It was not a second too soon, for, as another gust rushed furiously past the door of their shelter, the crazy ladder, shaken already from its rusty holdfasts by the unaccustomed tread of mortal feet, gave one parting groan and fell with a crash and rattle as of dry bones, upon the ground beneath.

CHAPTER XXVII.

STRANGE SIGHTS IN THE MILL.

IT was not till the dawn of the following morning that Antoine and Pierre fully recognised their precarious position.

Antoine, who had strained his mental and physical strength to an almost dangerous point, had scarcely stretched his limbs upon the floor of the little upper chamber, when, in defiance of the groans of Pierre, the roar of the thunder, and the bright flashes of lightning which ceaselessly ripped open the sky beyond, he fell into a deep sleep. He had had no rest the night before, and now nature could no longer be baffled. Hunger, thirst, present pain, future sufferings, were all lost in a deep, delicious rest, from which all Pierre's efforts to rouse him were in vain.

Not so Pierre. No amount of exhaustion could have, under such circumstances, brought him repose. His surroundings were such as to fire him with horror, fear, and suspense, and his tortured mind, filled with all the superstitious tales which he had heard from Janette Chaudron and read from her foolish lore book, refused to be comforted.

He lay on the ground, it is true, almost as still as Antoine, because his limbs were numb and powerless ; and, besides, his left arm was round his dog, and if he moved ever so slightly, the poor beast moaned piteously, and tried to drag himself nearer to his

master. It was his mind, his miserable, godless mind, which burned with a ceaseless fire, rushing forward at one moment with an agony of fear, only to turn back with an equal agony of remorse. Yes, forward, backward, until all was a feverish tangle of passion and pain and grief, while, added to all this mental suffering, there was thirst, such a thirst, a mad craving for one mouthful of cold water to wet his lips and his parched throat.

He thrust his hand out through the open doorway to catch the rain, as it swept in gusts past their hiding-place, but the deep projecting roof interfered, and a stray drop now and again caught in the hollow of his hand seemed, instead of easing his thirst, only to add fuel to the pain.

How could Antoine sleep on so calmly? Had he no thirst, no heart-searchings, no dread of his unnatural surroundings? Ah, well for him that he did not know all the evils that must follow, and which they themselves had invited by entering into such an unhallowed shelter. Then, too, Antoine had not heard that cry nor seen the white figure that flitted past him on the hill-top. Yes, this was the thought that had the mastery over all his other terrors. Could this have been the pale spirit of his Angela? Had she in that forlorn moment cried to him for help or warned him of coming danger?

That he had heard a cry and seen a figure pass by him swiftly at the foot of the mill, as he waited for Antoine, he felt certain; and, what was stranger still, through the moaning and screaming of the wind, and the creaking of the sails, and the far-off roar of the water rushing over the cliff below them, he still at intervals heard that cry; voices as it were, murmur-

ing hither and thither, and now and then a groan as if of pain.

Were Antoine but awake he would hear those sounds for himself. Stone and wood could not emit such thrilling cries of pain nor smothered sobs of anguish. Did not Janette tell him on that very night when Frau Gartmann spoke of the mill and the strange sight she had witnessed of flames issuing from its windows? Had not Janette herself told him in secret, with bated breath, as if even she feared to speak of such things, that in this very mill, this very building within whose walls he was now himself a prisoner, the wretched spirits of the dead were held in thrall by wretches such as Christine and her crew, and only permitted on rare and evil nights to wander forth to cause panic and horror by their ghostly appearance, or by cries and pitiful sounds to allure others to follow them into the snares prepared for them by the godless workers of witchcraft?

Several times Pierre called to Antoine to awake. He pushed him roughly with his sabots, but all in vain: Antoine's sleep was too profound. Once only he answered angrily, "Canst thou not leave me alone? What is the good of plaguing one so?" and then, turning on his side, fell into, if possible, a deeper and more profound repose.

But at four o'clock, in the dim morning light, Pierre, who had risen with difficulty to his feet and taken a survey of the little room in which they had passed the night, and who had then gazed for some breathless moments through the open doorway, now roused his companion without hesitation and with imperative command.

"Awake, Antoine! awake! Antoine, stir thy-

self! Shake off thy sleep! We are in the worst plight now we have ever been in!"

"How so?" asked Antoine, rubbing his eyes wearily and stretching his tired limbs. "It was cruel to wake me from such a dream. I thought I was at home, and——"

"Never mind thy thoughts or thy dreams, and as to thy home, it may be farther off than thou wouldst care to think of. The ladder is gone, Antoine, and we are shut up here for good and all!"

"Why surely, at the worst, we can leap down," cried Antoine, springing swiftly to his feet, and approaching the doorway.

"Aye, so I thought, but it is as sheer and steep as a precipice. It is plain that to drop or leap from this height would be alike certain death. See how the ladder has been smashed into atoms by the fall, and think what chance we should have. We are like rats in a trap," continued Pierre gloomily, "and like them also we can do nothing but wait helplessly till the moment for our death arrives."

"Death!" cried Antoine, angrily, "thou art in haste to kill us off. Rats have escaped ere now from traps, and so shall we. We must set our wits to work, that is all, and we shall soon light on some plan."

"My wits are wider awake than thine, and have been for many a long hour. I tell thee, Antoine, no prisoners tied hand and foot in a dungeon, miles below the sea, are farther off from help than we are. Hour by hour and inch by inch we must die here, for who is there to come to our assistance, and how are we to help ourselves?" Pierre's face as he uttered these words was grey as the morning light itself, which came straggling faintly through heavy rain and storm

clouds. "Remember," he added, bitterly, "we have no food and no water, and how are we to live?"

"You give me no time for reflection ; keep silence for a moment," cried Antoine, "and cease tolling our funeral bell. It cannot be so bad as thou thinkest. The rabbit does not lie down helplessly at the door of his house when the ferret comes in to drink his blood. At least one can fight it out to the last."

"Fight! aye, if there were anything to fight ; stone walls and starvation are not enemies we can easily subdue."

"Let us look well around and see first what our prison is made of," said Antoine, trying to speak with some cheerfulness ; "the floor is rotten enough in all conscience, where the grit and dust allows one to see it. The rafters are just a trifle high to reach, and if one could swing himself up there is not much to be gained. Ah! if I had but brought my goat's horn we might have blown it until we made them hear us."

"If we had not brought up the dog, and if he had recovered sufficiently to run home, he might have served as a guide to this accursed hill. He is better, thou seest, and not an hour ago he lifted his head from the ground and licked my hand. See how he turns his head when I speak of him. He must die too, I suppose, poor beast," and Pierre's voice faltered as he gazed fixedly in the face of the poor dying beast at his feet.

After fully a quarter of an hour spent in earnest search and survey within the mill, Antoine sat down on the floor in silence. Cobwebs, grit, sand, musty chaff and dirt, many inches deep, he had pushed aside painfully, and searched through in the hope of finding,

he knew not what ; a loose plank, perhaps, or a crack in the rotten flooring through which he might gaze down into the body of the mill and see if there were any attainable mode of descent or escape. But the search had been fruitless, and the fears which had long ago appalled the mind of his companion were closing fast over his heart now.

Antoine covered his face with his hands, for the sight of Pierre, sitting opposite to him, with a face expressive of the utmost human misery, was more than he could just now bear. It seemed to him that if he thought the matter well over in quiet and silence, he must light on some expedient for escape, but it was impossible to think connectedly, with the warring of the elements outside and the consciousness of Pierre's presence within, whose eyes, whenever he looked up, were fixed upon him in a gaze of the most pitiable anxiety.

"If my father knew, or could even faintly guess, that we were here, he would come at once to our rescue. He has no foolish fears of this hill, nor mother either ; but the question is, will they, or can they guess?" said Antoine, half speaking to himself.

"Impossible," replied Pierre hopelessly.

"We might wait till night-time, and fire the gun up in the air. The noise and the light might attract some one."

"The gun is down yonder by the cataract. I flung it on the ground when I found I had shot poor Wolf, and I forgot to take it up again."

"You may be sure of one thing, Pierre," said Antoine, with decision, 'when they find we are both missing, the whole town will turn out to look for us, and some one may venture in this direction."

"Never!" cried Pierre, passionately, "and if they were to tempt their fate, they would probably be struck blind or dumb or dead. It is in vain to expect help from the village."

Antoine tossed his head impatiently, and relapsed into silence. Hunger, keen and fierce, was beginning to torture him, and even to speak seemed to increase its pangs, while to argue was impossible.

So the long, dull morning passed on, the wind keeping up a ceaseless war, and billows of clouds rolling across the hill-side.

Pierre, who had not slept during the night, fell every now and then into involuntary snatches of sleep, awaking each time, more hopeless and miserable than before.

With him thirst was the uppermost distress. Hunger lurked in the background, but thirst, dry and cruel, was torturing him.

Even the anguish of such suffering was, however, comparatively lost in the distress of his mind. With a brain rendered acutely sensitive by a long course of morbid reading, in which he had latterly indulged, he was realising, as he lay there so silently, all the horrors of his approaching death; and the snatches of sleep, which brought back his home to him, the little village, the churchyard on the hill-side, and the chalet, within which his mother sat weeping, only seemed to push him to the very verge of madness.

"Oh, had I not lost Janette's charm, all would have gone differently," he moaned to himself; and yet, as he thought of Janette and her evil hag-like face, the fears of death became each moment more appalling.

Later on in the afternoon, waking up from another troubled dream, he saw Antoine praying. He could

not be mistaken. His eyes were raised, his hands clasped, and tears were on his uplifted face.

"As if all the prayers in the world could bring us help," he muttered, contemptuously; and yet, down in his inmost soul, his soul which had stood naked before him all the day, Pierre wished that he might dare to pray, but the time for that was past.

Antoine stirred presently, and turning round suddenly, their eyes met.

"Ha, ha!" sneered Pierre, "wert thou watching like Elijah to see the ravens flying down from the clouds with meat? Thine eyes, at any rate, looked hungry enough."

"Did they?" replied Antoine, in a somewhat husky voice. "And yet, comrade, if we must make up our minds to die, 'twere well to turn our eyes heavenwards. Dost thou not think so?"

"I think," replied Pierre, with a sudden fire leaping through the dull misery of his eyes, "that rather than die here, inch by inch, and minute by minute, whimpering and praying, and suffering agonies of mind and body, I would prefer to fling myself down on my head on the ground beneath, and make a swift end of all."

"It has been in my thoughts too," replied Antoine; "but——" he paused and sighed heavily.

"But what?"

"Why dost thou ask? We do not think alike on these subjects, and it wearies me to talk. I am sick with hunger, and faint with thirst. My God, have pity on us."

Antoine covered his face with his hands, and, leaning back against the damp and musty wall behind him, burst into a passion of tears.

The dog whined pitifully at the sound of Antoine's sobs, and tried to drag himself along the ground to lick his hand, but his strength was almost gone.

"If I knew but one thing," moaned Antoine, "I think I could face death with less anguish of mind."

"And what is that?"

"It is my mother. The fear that she is suffering, perhaps dead. I cannot drive it from my mind."

"What folly, Antoine. Why, yesterday morning she was well enough to rise at cockcrow, and to interpose between thee and me. I saw her with my own eyes, and as thou hast neither heard nor seen anything of her since, it is simple waste of sorrow to imagine troubles which we know to be impossible."

"I trust she is safe," cried Antoine, excitedly, "for thy hand went near enough yesterday to slaying her."

"My hand!"

"Aye, thine."

"Antoine, what sayest thou?" Pierre rose on his knees and leaned over towards the spot where Antoine was seated. It was growing dusk now, and he could hardly see the features of his companion, and he dreaded, he scarce knew what.

But Antoine had relapsed into his former gloomy silence, and no question of Pierre's could drag from him any further information; only once, about an hour later, he cried bitterly—

"Oh, if one could only fall asleep now, and die, and awake in heaven. My own mother is there," he added, with a sob, "and little Angela, too. I should see her."

This was more than Pierre could listen to. A sudden flaming anger sprang up in his breast against

Antoine. What right had he to speak of Angela, and of seeing her again? She belonged to him. She was to have been his wife; she was nothing to any one else. Why should Antoine speak confidently of a meeting on which *he* durst not even think? Pierre struck his clenched hand upon the ground until the floor trembled, and the gritty dust sprang up chokingly

"If thou speakest of Angela again, I will kill thee," he cried, hoarsely. "Thou hast neither hand nor part in her, and I will not have thee even mention her name."

"If thou wert to kill me we should but meet the sooner," replied Antoine, coldly. "Thou canst not take heaven from me, and she is there."

"Thou speakest of heaven as if it were thine by right, base cur that thou art," cried Pierre, contemptuously.

"Aye, aye, it is true. I am base, and vile, and miserable, so are we both; but then it was just for sinners such as we are that Christ died and——listen! what was that?"

Pierre and Antoine simultaneously leaped to their feet, and gazed out through the open doorway.

It was a cry, long, terrible, and strange, which had suddenly resounded through the mill; but as they stared down into the gathering gloom beneath there was nothing to be seen, and they looked into each other's faces with a questioning horror.

"What was it?" asked Antoine, whose heart still smote against his side with startling throbs.

"How can I tell?"

"It was a human cry, of that I am certain."

Pierre did not answer. Even in the darkness Antoine could see the unearthly pallor of his companion's face.

"Some one must be about the place. Perhaps they are searching for us. Shall we call out that we are here?"

Pierre smiled bitterly. "If the dead have ears, it might be useful."

"What folly. I, at least, will not be satisfied to remain silent when, perhaps, help is close at hand."

Antoine stood in the doorway and shouted aloud; but though he paused and waited for an answer to his appeal, there was none.

He shouted again, but with a like result. He prayed passionately for help, but total silence followed on his prayer. He called on Pierre to aid him in the effort, but Pierre remained dumb as a stone, and at length, exhausted with his fruitless efforts, Antoine drew back from the doorway and cast himself on the ground. His hunger was now becoming an agony, and the bitterdisappointment of the last few minutes seemed to have whetted it to a still more unendurable point.

"How long must one suffer like this before one dies?" he groaned aloud. "Pierre, lad, of what art thou thinking that thou standest there so silently? Art thou not also miserable?"

"Aye," replied Pierre, with dry lips, "miserable."

"It sounded so near, almost under our feet," continued Antoine, following his own thoughts; "and yet if any one were about the mill they would surely have answered me. What dost thou say, Pierre, was it not a strangely human cry?"

"I heard it before now; last night when I was standing at the foot of the ladder, and again in the early dawn," replied Pierre, gloomily.

"Well, and what dost thou think?"

"I think that when thou and I are dead, as we

surely shall be in a day or two at most, we shall also cry with the same voice, and there will be none to hear us."

Antoine moved restlessly at his companion's words, but made no effort to contradict him. The cry had perplexed him sorely, and he would willingly have had some reasonable explanation presented to his mind.

"If it were not for this cruel hunger," he said, presently, "one might try to die bravely, but with such an anguish tearing at one's vitals, one can neither think nor pray. Which of us, I wonder, will die first?"

"I shall," replied Pierre, quickly.

"How so? Thou art not weaker than I am."

"I shall not wait for death," said Pierre, resolutely. "I shall meet him half way; on that point I have made up my mind."

Antoine recognised the desperation in his friend's voice, and though he longed to speak some words of comfort, he knew this was no moment to attempt it. He, himself, had to do fierce battle with the doubts and tremors which even now assailed his own soul, and the fear of death came over him from time to time with an overpowering force.

The storm meanwhile was fast subsiding, and now and then a watery moon shone through the white billows which still scudded over its face. As night fell, a mournful sleep came down on both, and there was silence in the little upper chamber of the mill.

But about one o'clock in the morning, when the moon had sunk and a thick darkness covered the hill-top, they both started simultaneously from their sleep, aroused by the same strange cry which had already filled their hearts with terror.

Antoine was the first to gain the door, for in the

darkness of the night he could only guess its whereabouts by the cool air which came sifting through it.

He gazed down, and Pierre, also creeping forward in trembling fear, heard him cry out.

"What is it, Antoine?"

"I do not know; I cannot tell," he whispered; "there is a red light on the grass outside there, to the right. Here, bend down; do not lean out too far. Now, canst thou not see? There is some one moving, too, inside the mill, for I see the shadows cast upon the grass."

"It is too awful," groaned Pierre.

"There must be a door into the mill on that side," whispered Antoine. "It is the shadow of a woman. Look; she is lifting something in her arms. What or who can it be? It is a child. She is raising it again in her arms. She is kissing it. I am certain I heard a voice. There, see; Pierre, look quickly;" but at this moment the light suddenly went out, and at the same instant a cry, the same cry, went up into the night, pitiful, despairing, and full of some terrible pain. Pierre thrust his fingers into his ears and moaned, with his face pressed against the clammy stones, but Antoine caught the cry of pain in all its fulness as it echoed through the silent mill:

"À Dieu! à Dieu!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ANGELA'S GIFT

IT was four o'clock in the morning when Pierre, with a white set face, rose from the ground on which he had been lying and softly approached the spot where Antoine was sleeping.

His companion's face was turned full towards the light of the rising sun, but still he slept on. There was a look of absolute peace on his features, and his breath came slowly and regularly, as if he were but taking his natural rest in his chalet home in the village. Pierre looked at him in a dull amazement, and, as if almost sickened by the sight, moved away into the open doorway.

But if the sight of Antoine's quiet face had some disquieting element in it, what comfort could Pierre draw from the landscape outside? Perfect peace seemed to hang there also. It was in the air; it lay in golden fleece upon the sides of the mountains. Every trace of storm was gone. The stream, it is true, was still hurrying on, surcharged with rain, but every ripple on its surface sparkled in the early sunlight, and every eddy was a pool of gold.

The mountains, whose pine forests still lay dreaming in profound shadow, seemed crowned with amber; and, more perfect than all in its peaceful purity, rose up the snowy peak, which Pierre could never look on without thoughts of his lost love.

The rosy flush of the early sun had just caught its

topmost peak, and its blush seemed to deepen in intensity as he gazed earnestly towards it.

Why was it that at this moment, this last dark hour of his sinful life, the earth had never seemed so beautiful to Pierre before? Why did the mountains smile at him, and the heavens throb with a light which seemed full of some celestial promise?

He turned abruptly away, and moved within into the darkest corner of his prison. Poor Wolf, who seemed to fear some approaching danger, dragged himself forward and whined at his master's feet.

Close by the spot where Pierre stood there was an iron stanchion in the wall, used probably to fix the arm of the mill which communicated with it outside. It had, however, snapped off from its original connection with the centre beam which supported the roof of the building, and, red and rusty, it protruded now about two feet into the air above Pierre's head.

On this iron bar Pierre had resolved to make an end of his miserable life. All night long fears too appalling for words, thoughts too terrible for utterance, had filled his soul. Death would be, must be, a reprieve to such an overpowering agony of mind. The little room in which he was imprisoned had seemed peopled with shapes and forms, which even the closing his eyes could not hide out: his mother's face, grey and tear-stained, but pressed close to his, as though she would kiss and comfort him—his mother whom he had of late so cruelly neglected; Angela, too, had haunted him, not the sweet Angela of his childhood, nor yet the Angela of his boyhood, but his dead love, lying so still on her pillow, with all her life gone out. Yet more haunting than all had been one face, that of little Paul. Let him look

what way he would, he saw *it*; those beautiful eyes, with their troubled pain and their still more terrible fear, were for ever fixed on him in a mute, unspoken appeal. In vain he covered his eyes with his hand; his burning eye-balls still held the painful picture. In vain he turned towards the open doorway; the sky seemed full of angel faces, and every head had the face of little Paul.

The night had seemed a year, with its terrors, its cries, and its visions. "When the day dawns," he had cried bitterly, "if help has not arrived, I will release myself from the bondage of this death;" and day had dawned now, the beautiful morning sun had arisen, and no help had come, so his own hand must bring the longed-for release.

He would not awaken Antoine, that he was resolved upon; he would certainly interfere and baulk him in his purpose. It would be a shock to him, of course, to awaken from slumber and find his companion hanging cold and dead from the roof beside him; but Antoine himself could not be far from death, and, when once that had overtaken him, what would it signify which had died first?

And yet, as Pierre reasoned with himself about this and many things, the cold sweat came out in large drops on his forehead, and the hand with which he unfolded the long woollen comforter that he wore round his neck, trembled violently.

He stood up, however, and, stretching himself to his fullest height, he fastened the wrapper to the iron bar above him. Once, long ago, he had hanged a dog which had bitten his father in the hand; he remembered, with a cruel distinctness, the noose, the knot, and the dead depending figure. It was unpleasant to

think of, but what of that? When Memory, this grave-digger, which all day and all night turned up the old skeletons of his past, and threw them around to scare him, was dead, what cared he what followed?

Then, as he arranged the fatal loop, and ran his hand down the rope to measure its length, some other thought seized him. His mother; yes, she, with her own hands, had knitted this very comforter for him, which now, instead of bringing warmth to his body, was to hold him fixed by its strength in the cold chill of death.

She had given it to him the last winter, when the snow was on the ground, and she had kissed him as she had fastened it round his throat. Even then he had not thanked her as he ought, and, though he had returned the kiss, she had moved away with tears in her eyes.

"Ah, well, I shall never trouble her more with my tempers and my coldness! Heaven knows I loved her in my heart. She told me once I had no heart. She called me a vaurien and a coward. I must indeed have driven her to a pitch of madness to draw such epithets upon my head."

"Farewell, Antoine," he said, mournfully, as he stooped over his still-sleeping companion. "My true friend, to think I have also thy death to answer for! Ah! I have a load of guilt weighing on me enough to sink ten souls. It is well that he sleeps so calmly now, for when he awakens, and has none save the dead to watch with him, what then? Will he place his soul in the balance between life and death, or will he follow my example? Mercy! what was that that fell from my jerkin? Surely, impossible! Just heavens! it cannot be my little Angela's dying gift."

Stretching across Antoine's recumbent figure, Pierre snatched at a small round object which, having fallen from the neck of his now open jerkin, had dropped first upon Antoine's shoulder and then, with a slight tinkling sound, had rolled along the floor.

"Heavenly Father, I thank Thee! yes, a thousand thousand times I thank Thee!" he cried, almost unconscious of his words, as he gazed at the brown and withered berry which lay in the palm of his hand.

"Angela, dearest heart, if thou couldst only open thy pale lips to me now and give me words of comfort, as thou didst that night when, in thy dying hours, thou gavest me this token of thy love. Speak to me, dear heart," he cried again, looking up passionately towards the blackened rafters overhead, "and help me. If the angels in heaven rejoice over one sinner that is saved, surely thou must weep for one that is lost." As Pierre uttered this vain appeal, Antoine moved, and Pierre, rising quickly, staggered giddily backward against the wall.

He was faint, and all the round world seemed to move before his eyes. The mountain athwart the open doorway reeled across the sky, the floor seemed sinking beneath his feet, and a great weakness, perhaps that of death, was gathering round his heart. Still, he grasped tightly the poor faded berry in his hand, and as he closed his eyes in ever increasing faintness, a whisper came slowly to his ear: "Christ pardon and comfort thee. Cast thy burden on the Lord. He will give thee rest. There *is* a heaven, and we shall yet meet there." Then there came a great stillness, and it seemed to Antoine, as he woke up suddenly, and gazed on Pierre's face, that he was dead.

CHAPTER XXIX.

IS IT A SPIRIT ?

BUT death was not to come just yet. Pierre revived slowly from his trance, and found once more the woollen comforter around his throat, and Antoine's arms thrown lovingly about his shoulders.

For hours they sat there, Pierre's head pillowed on his friend's breast. At the sight of the noose hanging on the beam opposite, and the dead white face beside him, contracted with an agony which he could not bear even to look upon, Antoine had realised, with a sudden rush of sympathy and pitiful remorse, all the anguish of mind which must have driven his companion to this last despairing act of sin and sorrow, and, while he strove to bring him back to life, he had determined to use these last few hours which remained to them yet of their existence, in acts of love, and words of hope and comfort.

Pierre was very weak and low, and scarcely responded to Antoine's murmured texts and little efforts at consolation. Once he opened his grasp and showed Angela's red berry pressed tightly within his palm, and then, just for a moment, a smile passed over his face, such as Antoine had not seen there for years; but it was only a passing gleam, and it left Antoine in amazement, as he knew from Pierre's mother that the last relic of poor Angela's love was carried by Pierre always by day and by night, fastened up in the same

charm which Janette had given him to protect him from the evil eye.

This charm Pierre had lost on the hill-side, and yet how came the charmed berry in his hand? But while Pierre still lay with closed eyes, and the last faint flicker of the smile on his lips, the mystery was made known, for on the ground beside him, he presently discovered a piece of broken shoe lace, and, attached loosely to one end of it, the amulet itself, empty as the charm it had once been supposed to contain, and which must have fallen from the breast of Pierre's jerkin at the moment he stooped over his friend to say farewell.

Antoine lifted up the lace with the bag of hideous, wrinkled skin attached to it, and flung them both out through the open doorway, and for a space his heart hardened once more against his companion, as the cruel face of Janette rose up before his mind's eye, and he remembered all Pierre's hardness of heart, and all his cruel persecution of Christine and her little grandson.

But this mood did not last long, and, as the day wore on, softer thoughts came to him. The pangs of hunger had for the present died away within him, and the beauty of the outside world seemed to take a strange possession of his soul; the still, blue sky, the mountains slumbering in the midday sun, the woods drowsy and dark, and the far-off pasture grounds, in that strange, half unreal land, where he himself once had led his flocks; and then that day came back to him, when, sitting on the sunny hill-side he had reasoned with himself of many things—of life and death, and the judgment to come; and doubts dark and terrible had filled his thoughts, and how——; but at this

moment a soft, humming sound filled the air, and, in at the open doorway of the mill there sailed a large bee, heavily laden with her daily store of thymy honey. She droned and sang about Antoine's head, till, in his weakness, he almost fancied he was again out yonder with the flocks, and that he was watching the goats nibbling the fresh grass of the pastures.

By-and-by this fair landscape was no more a reality, but a picture he was seeking painfully to paint. This landscape was to bring him fame, such unerring harmony of colour, he said to himself, as had never yet been attained by mortal man : he had lived to accomplish a work at which the world must stand amazed ; and what about this money, these thirty pieces of gold, which was to purchase for him prosperity, and prove but the seed of endless wealth and far-sounding fame ? Ah, there was some pain attached to this thought ! What was it ? He paused and pondered ; he could not catch the fleeting thrill that jarred upon his happiness and disturbed the harmony ; but lo ! while he gazed, the picture was gone, and in its place had come a background of dark clouds. Antoine leaned forward, and gazed with sightless streaming eyes. What was this sudden field of darkness, flecked only with stars of fire, upon which, even while he looked, words of blood leaped forward to the surface and quivered, as with the quivering of some living flame.

Then Antoine, with a start of agony, came back to the reality of his miserable position, and remembered bitterly the words of his mother, as she had pleaded with him only two short mornings ago, beside the sweet-smelling saw-pit in the village home.

Yes, only two mornings ago he had been ready,

for a handful of gold, to barter away his soul, and to give up, for the hope of earthly fame, his everlasting inheritance. He had, at least, weighed the two in the balance, and allowed his mind to dwell pleasantly on the prospect arranged so temptingly before him, and had consented to join in that against which his whole being revolted. What right had he, Antoine, to judge others, he who himself had only been prevented by heavenly interposition from committing so deadly a crime?

He looked round at his companion, and his heart sank. There was a grey hue upon Pierre's face which sent a thrill of fear through him. His eyes, which were half open, were glazed, and as Antoine moved a little, so as to see his features better, the head, which was leaning on his bosom, fell heavily to one side.

"Pierre!"

"Yes, my friend."

"What is the matter with thee?"

"Nothing;" with a long, heavy sigh.

"Art thou dying, Pierre?"

"Yes, yes, I am dying."

"Couldst not thou rouse thyself for a time, even? help may come. I have hopes thou knowest nothing of; help may come; cheer up, dear friend, and try to speak to me;" but Pierre uttered not another word, he only moaned, and stretching himself out at full length, lay his head upon the hard boards.

Antoine's heart bled for the hopeless weakness of his friend. He knew this extreme debility could be nothing but the herald of death, and that the end must be near at hand. The bold, wilful, defiant heart would soon cease to beat; a heart which, laden with

sin and tortured with doubt, was still, and ever had been, dear to him as no other heart had ever been. Could he not whisper some heavenly comfort now into his ear even in this his parting hour, and cast one ray of light down the dark valley of the shadow of death?

Again Pierre moaned, and moved slightly.

Antoine drew off his own jerkin and threw it over his friend's shoulders and across his face, so that the light might not hurt those poor dim eyes, which still, though glazed, seemed to reveal some aching, unreachable sorrow.

Wolf, too, became restless and disturbed. He appeared, as it were, temporarily possessed. Only a few minutes before, Antoine had thought him dead, he had lain so many hours without sound or motion; but now some strange excitement seemed upon him. He dragged himself round and round and whined, and a sudden light came into his great, melancholy eyes. He gazed at Antoine, and tried, with uplifted head, to emit one of those long, mournful howls which, at night-time, had often made sad the superstitious hearts of the inhabitants of Protogno.

Antoine tried in vain to compose him, until the dog, having dragged himself close to the door of the mill, sank exhausted on the floor; but though he no longer moved, he kept his great eyes steadfastly fixed on Antoine's face.

And now the sun was going down behind the mountains, and the air seemed full of a soft pink light, which hung on the hills and over the valley, and burnished every spear of grass on the bare hill-top with a ruddy glow. The church bell, far off in the village, was throbbing softly a sweet musical chime,

which could be heard over the low rushing of the mountain stream.

With the sound of the evening bell there came into Antoine's heart the low refrain of the evening hymn, sung at home each night at this hour by his parents, as they laid their little ones to rest in the chalet room. He sang it over softly to himself, and as he did so, the little faces peering from their snowy beds, the youngest on his mother's knee, his father seated beside the stove, the yellow maize-stalks hanging from the rafters, and everywhere and around the sweet smell of pine-wood and lavender-scented linen, came over his senses, as in a glass darkly.

Just then, as it were from the far-off village, or from the distant snow-peak, lying like a rose-leaf on the amber sky, or from the ground beneath, there came the voice of a little child, sweet, unembarrassed, and gay.

The dog stirred again, but, weak even to death, sank back helplessly against the wall. Antoine crept softly into the doorway, and looking out into the red evening air, saw standing on the ground at the foot of the mill, and gazing upwards with sweet uplifted eyes, that face of little Paul, which once, long ago, had been mistaken by Silvestro Milano for the face of an angel.

The little fellow was clad, as he had been all his life, in a loose, white, linen dress; his flaxen curls hung softly down his shoulders, and his naked feet were but half visible in the rough tufts of grass which grew rankly at the base of the fallen, and now useless, ladder.

He was gazing up at the mill door, but as yet had not seen Antoine, for the red evening sun, with a departing energy, had caught even this forsaken hill-

top in its dying embrace, and the child's eyes were dazzled with the ruddy glare.

"It is as I thought," murmured Antoine; "this miserable den is their home. If Christine is here, she will not let us die of hunger, or perhaps she has already gone to summon my father to our help. If only we might live till then," and Antoine, looking back into the mill, saw Pierre's face still covered with the jerkin. "Spare him, good Lord, spare him," cried Antoine, in the anguish of his heart; "he must not die now, just when help and hope are close at hand."

Then Antoine, once more warily looking forth from the doorway, saw that little Paul was no longer standing immediately beneath the mill, but was moving to and fro. He was humming softly to himself in a strange wordless fashion the air of the hymn which Antoine had been singing only a few minutes before, and with a mind temporarily free from all fear or pre-occupation, he gathered here and there a buttercup or wild pansy, thousands of which starred the grassy slope beneath.

At last his little hand was almost full of flowers; the rose colour was fainting from the sky, and all the earth seemed fainting with it. Paul turned, and as he turned, his eyes suddenly met those of Antoine who, no longer anxious to conceal himself, was now leaning out at the doorway, and evidently eager to attract the child's attention.

At first Paul flushed violently and covered his face with his hands; but after a moment or two, hearing Antoine call him softly by his name, he recovered himself, and withdrawing the hand which clasped the flowers from his eyes, he smiled up at Antoine, and holding up the pansies and butter-

cups, he cried, in a sweet, exultant voice, "À Dieu, à Dieu!"

Once more Antoine gazed hastily round at Pierre, but there was no movement or sound, save a heavy, moaning breath that showed how the weary spirit was labouring within him to be free.

"Little Paul," said Antoine, softly; "come near to the foot of the mill, that I may speak to thee."

Paul at once advanced, still with the same smile of confidence on his lips, and the flowers uplifted joyfully.

"Little one, listen to me. We are hungry, very hungry, and we have nothing up here to eat. The mill ladder, thou seest, is broken, and we cannot come down. Is there no one within who could give us a morsel of bread, or show us how we might escape from here?" Paul listened, but it seemed as if he heard not. He gazed long and earnestly up at Antoine, and the smile faded away from his lips. Still he made no sign of having comprehended, only again he pointed upwards with his flowers, and uttered the same plaintive cry, "À Dieu."

Antoine, now grasping only the stone lintels of the door, stretched his head as far as he dared out beyond the entrance, and called in a low voice to the child.

"Is Christine below in the mill? If so, call her out to speak with me."

Paul shook his head sadly. His face, as Antoine finished his sentence, grew white, and into his eyes Antoine could see the dawn of that strange, terrible pain creeping, which none could bear to look at.

"Do not fret," he said, in a low, tender voice. "When thou seest her thou canst show her where we

are. Ah! what lovely flowers, and the evening, how beautiful it is!"

So, soothingly, he sought, with reassuring speech, to stop the growing anguish which his former words had set vibrating.

And in a measure he was successful. Paul had evidently caught his words this time, for first he looked at the flowers in his hands, over which he bent his head so low that Antoine could not see his face, and then he raised his head and gazed earnestly at the landscape around him; so earnestly and so long that Antoine grew uneasy at the fixed, sad stare. His eyes were riveted on the last gleam of evening light which lay like a bar of purest gold across a violet sky.

"Paul," cried Antoine at last, "what is it? What art thou looking at?"

The little fellow started painfully, but recovering the old sweet smile with which he had first greeted Antoine's appearance, he pointed towards the fading golden line which still streaked the sky opposite, and, stretching out his hand full of the blue and yellow heartsease in the direction of the west, he cried for the third time that evening, in a voice full of strange pathos and lingering melancholy, his only earthly utterance, "À Dieu."

CHAPTER XXX.

À DIEU !

FOR some hours after this Antoine waited and hoped. He seemed to feel it impossible that they should be so near help, and yet that they should be left alone to die, up in this lonely tower, without an effort even being made to save them ; but first ten minutes, and then the half-hours flew by, and no one came to their assistance.

The hunger, too, which despair had almost quenched in Antoine's frame, and which hope had again revived, gnawed at his vitals with an ever-increasing strength, and at times, betwixt weakness, hope, and despair, he felt as if his mind must presently give way.

The mill, besides, to-night, had assumed a more ghostly aspect, for, in the now cloudless sky, a moon had risen up clear and brilliant, and every stone and crack and rafter within the little chamber that was exposed to her rays took a mysterious aspect of chilliness and decay.

The dog even seemed to feel this baneful influence, for when the moon fell in a bright patch across his resting-place, he held up his dumb throat for the old familiar bay, which failing to produce, he dragged himself farther off into a more shadowy recess, and lay down with a short but expressive whine of sorrow.

Once or twice Antoine uncovered Pierre's face, but it was always the same, fixed, as it were, in a trance of pain, and only rendered more deathly white by the

light which seemed to touch with a spell of death all the objects it fell on within the little chamber.

But with Pierre it was not yet death. He still breathed, though with evident difficulty ; and when Antoine touched his hand, which was cold and clammy, he found it still tightly clasped on the dying gift of little Angela.

Antoine durst not even seek for sleep ; he must watch and wait for even the faintest sound or signal of assistance ; and he prepared to plead for help should Christine appear upon the scene, and yet shrink from aiding them, lest by placing herself in their power she might risk the well-being of her charge.

He lay there watching, waiting, counting the chimes from the far-off church ; eight—nine—ten—and now eleven came, with long, mournful notes, like the echo of some funeral bell.

He could not even rest his mind now by looking out on the landscape. The glittering of the moon outside made him faint and giddy, and the pale, white peak opposite, though it sparkled in its close proximity to heaven, appeared to him at this moment like a shroud cast over some dead, sweet face.

All was so terribly still within and without that he could no longer endure the silence, and once again the evening hymn rose to his heart and then to his lips, and the sound, full of the earnestness of prayer, sped out through the open doorway on the night.

It was about then that Pierre stirred. He moved his limbs restlessly twice or thrice, and spoke thickly to himself. Antoine suddenly ceased his song, and turning round gazed at his companion with an overpowering sensation of horror.

That this sudden movement was the herald of a

swift dissolution he felt no doubt. He had dreaded it all the night, and now that it had come, he shrank from the agony of witnessing it.

The rough woollen coat still covered his face, but Pierre's right arm was stretched eagerly into the air as if seeking something.

"Help me !" he cried, "help me to rise. Mother ! Ah, Antoine, is it thou ? Here ! thy hand. I thought a millstone had been hung around my neck, and I had been cast into the Lac des Sapins."

"Thou art all safe ; we are near no lake," replied Antoine, raising his friend's head lovingly and throwing off the jacket.

"I would to heaven we were," cried Pierre, excitedly. "Canst thou not fetch me some water ? Miserable ! Is death so near, and I cannot speak ! Antoine ! once more thy hand, lad, there ! help me to my knees, for I must speak !"

His eyes were wild. He looked across at the wall opposite with an appealing glance ; then, with a shout, which echoed and echoed through the silent night and the lonely mill, he flung his arms high above his head and cried out, "Our Father, which art in heaven," then stopped, with uplifted face, but struggling breath. "Our Father, which art in heaven," he cried again, more softly, "forgive me my trespasses, as I forgive—as I—I—— Canst thou not say it for me, Antoine ?"

"Forgive those," suggested Antoine, falteringly.

"Yes, yes ; forgive those who have trespassed against me. Forgive ! forgive ! forgive !" His voice rose higher and higher, till it became a shriek of agonised entreaty ; his face was distorted, and his white lips quivered ; then, with a groan, he suddenly

fell back on Antoine's shoulder, and exclaimed bitterly, "Yes yes, there *is* a God. Angela was right, but I am unworthy to be called——"

"His son," added Antoine, in accents full of the tenderest feeling. He stopped abruptly, and, making a sudden gesture of silence, listened eagerly.

There was a movement to be heard distinctly somewhere in the mill beneath them; a sound, light, fluttering, and uncertain, but which gradually seemed to grow nearer and nearer. It was as if Pierre's cry of anguish had disturbed some feathered creature from its nest in the rafters beneath, which now moved restlessly to and fro in fear and distress, yet pausing now and then to utter a low note of comfort to its young.

"What is it?" asked Pierre, with the same wild glance of anxiety which now almost seemed to deprive him of the power of speech.

"I do not know," he gasped; "but it is like the footstep of a child."

"A child?" repeated Pierre, anxiously, while, in the remote corner of the loft, Wolf drew himself heavily together and looked up.

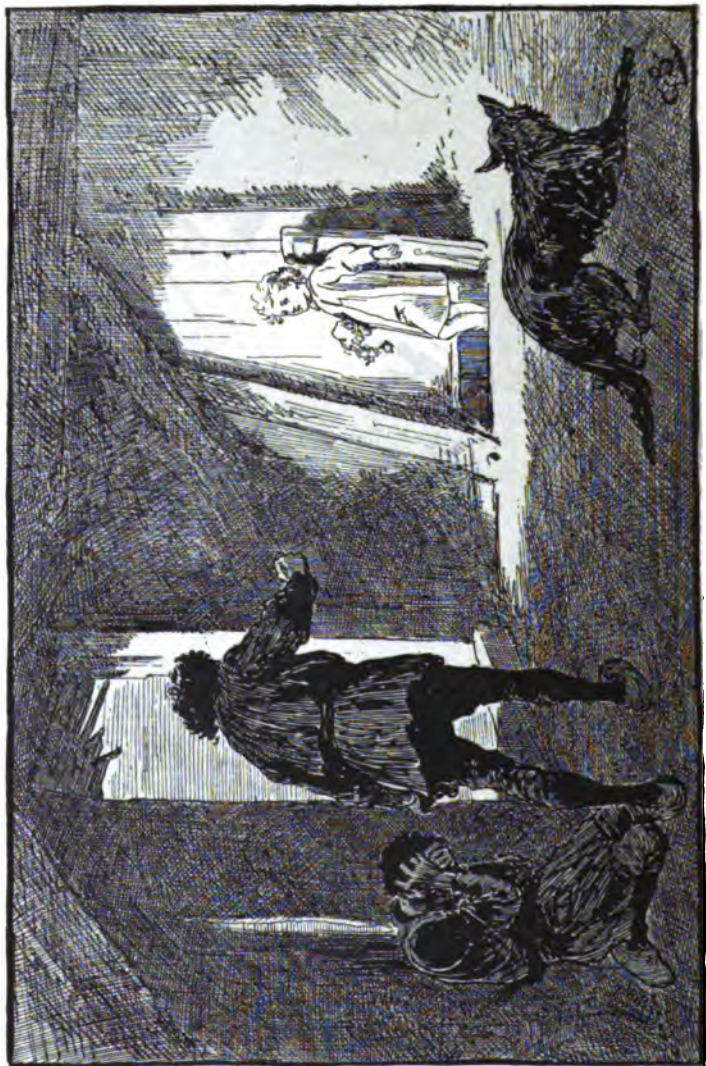
With an almost involuntary movement, Antoine leaned forward and placed his arm across those of Pierre, while he raised his right hand as if to warn Wolf to keep silence.

"Hush!" he exclaimed, "it is coming nearer! There must be a ladder beneath this room. I hear footsteps ascending! Keep still, Pierre! for the love of heaven, keep still!"

For Pierre was struggling to rise, and the agony of a terrible suspense was on his face.

"Life or death!" he cried, feverishly; "it must





"IN ITS PLACE STOOD THE FIGURE OF A LITTLE CHILD" (p. 339).

be one or the other. What is that?" he added eagerly, leaping to his knees, and seeking to release his arm from Antoine's grasp; "the floor yonder is moving! and see! see! it is rising up! Antoine, am I in my senses, or dost thou not see it also?"

It was at first only a cloud of dust, which, mounting in the full gleam of the moonlight, seemed to rise up like a pillar of pale fire flecked with stars of light; but the stars died out, and the dust returned to the dust from which it had risen, and in its place stood the figure of a little child.

"Paul!" gasped Pierre, as the moon shone with a cruel distinctness on the wide-opened eyes and the parted lips, and the soft outline of the wavy flaxen-haired head.

"Hush! do not speak! it is Paul!" cried Antoine, in a low voice. "Dost thou not see? He has brought us food and——"

But it was in vain to cry "Hush!" or to seek with human pity to stay the foot of Fate. The hour of Paul's emancipation had come, and the angel of death stood in the shadow with loving outstretched arms.

"Hush!" cried Antoine again; "down, Wolf! down! Merciful God! have pity on the child!"

"Keep back! keep back!" cried Pierre to the dog, staggering forward and striving to avert the terrible catastrophe; then covered his face, with a groan, for it was too late. Wolf, the wounded and dying brute, even in his own last agony, was true to the task his master had ever imposed on him, and, with a hoarse bark and helpless, impotent jaws, had sought to snatch at the child's white robe, which shone all too distinctly in the moonlight.

And then arose that well-known wail of an unspeakable fear high and terrible into the night, and both the lads, gathering an unnatural strength, rushed forward, not to slay but to save. Antoine, with a force he was unconscious of possessing, hurled the dog to one side, while Pierre stretched out his arms with a pleading cry of agony ; but vain were all their efforts. Antoine's pitiful love and Pierre's tardy remorse were alike unavailing ; no earthly love could save him now, for God had called him, and with his voiceless lips he had answered.

Yes, the hour of Paul's release had come ; his last bitter cry of anguish had been heard and answered, and without another sound or utterance of fear, the trap-door, which his childish strength had, up to this moment, scarcely sufficed to keep upright, fell back heavily ; the little foot on the topmost step of the ladder wavered, then slipped helplessly, the white figure fell like a drift of snow through the dark gap in the flooring ; there was a sound to which none durst listen, a descent swift and terrible into the darkness beneath ; and then a pause, a pause in which the whole earth seemed to join ; and then it came, what all seemed to await, the last brief testimony of a departing spirit, pure and undefiled before God, the uplifted voice of one whose eyes already saw the promised land, and knew that it was good ; one long exultant cry of a released and triumphant soul rushing into the arms of its Redeemer.

"À Dieu ! à Dieu ! à Dieu !"

And the lads, covering their faces in the room overhead, knew that little Paul was dead.

CHAPTER XXXI.

CURSE AND A BLESSING.

SOME old crusts of stale wheaten cake, a small stone cruse of water, and a few withered buttercups and pansies lay scattered on the floor of their prison, but neither of the lads stretched out his hands to touch them. Wolf also was dead ; in his last effort to fulfil the life-long teaching of his master, he had yielded up his existence, and he lay now, still and stark, near the trap-door through which Paul had so suddenly disappeared from his sight.

As the grim night wore on, the moon went down, and there was a short interval of darkness. Pierre and Antoine knew now that there was a way open to them to escape from their prison, but so far neither of them had ventured even to suggest such a possibility to the other.

Each, in his own heart, knew that to descend into the mill beneath was to come face to face with something which neither of them felt yet he had the courage to look upon. Perhaps in the morning, when even death looks less terrible, they might summon the necessary strength of mind, and descend ; but even then, if once safely outside the mill, where would the strength of body be to bring them within reach of home and help ?

At least so reasoned Antoine, whose mind had received no sudden or unlooked-for shock from the appearance of little Paul in their midst.

But with Pierre all was horror, amazement, and bitterest regret. He had not seen the little white figure wandering about the hill-side in the evening sun, nor called to it with eagerness for food or water. To him Paul had appeared like some spirit arising from the tomb at dead of night, confronting him at the very gates of death with its innocent eyes full of a voiceless reproach.

He was too weak to reason out the probable cause of Paul's presence in the mill, and though vaguely aware that they had now a possibility of escape thrown open to them, he did not grasp frantically at the hope, which only a few hours before would have appeared so unspeakably precious to his thoughts. On the contrary, he turned his face to the wall, and wished bitterly that the morning light might find him dead too, and his miserable life ended for ever.

But the morning light was quite distant, and this new strange ache at his heart, which cried for death as a release, was but the faint spark of a flame which presently must, in its spirit-searching agony, lay waste and ravage all before it.

At two o'clock in the morning Pierre roused himself to gaze curiously at Antoine, whose stealthy movements were perplexing him.

The light of the summer dawn was as yet so feeble that he could not be sure of his companion's whereabouts, but he fancied that he could see a dark figure near the centre of the room, crouching low upon the ground, and the sound of the breathing was as if Antoine's face were pressed against the floor.

"What is it, Antoine?" he cried, feverishly. Then, with a sudden ray of hope, "Can it be possible that Paul is still alive?"

"I cannot say," replied Antoine, speaking in the most guarded whisper. "Just now I heard a movement somewhere, but it was, I fancied, outside the mill. I am only listening to discover if—if——"

"If what?" questioned Pierre.

"Hush, hush! do not speak, do not breathe even; the faintest stir prevents me from hearing."

Pierre, holding his breath, waited in a terrible suspense for Antoine's next words. He also fancied he had himself heard, for a moment, a sound like the movement of feet, treading softly beneath over withered leaves.

"Couldst thou not call to him?" groaned Pierre, desperately.

"Silence! there is no use to call."

"But if he is alive, and we could help him?"

"Keep silence, I bid thee," cried Antoine, sharply. "I hear her now, within the mill; in a few moments she must know it all."

"Who? what?" cried Pierre, bewilderedly, while a sudden deadly fear filled his very soul with trembling.

Antoine had no need to answer. Had he answered his reply would not have been heard, for from the chamber beneath, at this moment, there rose up a cry, so wild, so bitter, so full of the supremest agony of the human heart, that Pierre, for the second time that night, pressed his hand tightly against his ears, and strove desperately not to hear.

But even with ever so tightly closed an ear, that piercing cry of an agonised heart must have found a passage to his brain. Again and again it rose, frantic, unmeasured, uncontrollable, broken with wildest expletives of love and tenderest words of pity.

Antoine, by this time, had succeeded in finding the outline of the trap-door, and, grasping desperately at it with his nails, had succeeded in raising it an inch or so above the flooring.

"What dost thou see?" asked Pierre, with dry lips, as Antoine groaned audibly.

"I see Christine!"

"Christine!! and the little one, what of him?"

"Nothing, nothing; do not interrupt me with questions. She has a light. She is at the foot of the ladder. She is kneeling on the ground beside something. Wait, I can see it all now. It is little Paul; and—yes—the child *is* dead! Hush, keep back, not a word; she has heard me, I saw her glance up quickly! Ah, what a face! I dare not look at it. She is rising up now; she is——" Antoine let the trap-door fall hastily from his grasp, and withdrew precipitately into the darkest corner of the room.

Pierre knew now that the critical moment of his life had come, and with eyes dilated and fixed with a speechless horror, he awaited its issue. He had not long to wait. With a sound swift and terrible came the footsteps of the avenger. The trap-door flew upwards with a leap, and turning with a groan upon its rusty hinges, fell backwards upon the floor with a crash that made the very ground quake dangerously.

But Pierre heard and felt nothing. He only saw before him the face of the woman whom he hated, the face of Christine, the witch, the were-wolf, the abhorred murderess of all his hopes, the wretch, whose death and torment he had vowed could alone restore to him his lost peace of mind and the tottering remnant of his self-respect.

She was standing now on the ground before him

defenceless, with gasping breath, outstretched arms, and empty hands, and yet he did not rise up to smite her, or leap forward to take the fiery vengeance of a life-time.

"Christine!" he cried, involuntarily, with a groan of anguish, "what brings thee here?"

"What brings me here, villain, dog, coward, pitiless wretch! How darest thou ask me such a question? Murderer, true demon that thou art, I say again, how darest thou ask me such a question?"

Pierre did not reply; he only covered his face with his hands and groaned.

"Hast thou no tongue?" she cried, stamping her foot on the ground; "I am come up here to call thee to account for this most cruel murder; and, before God, I warn thee, Pierre, that this hour thou shalt answer to me for the death of the child, or thou shalt not leave this place alive. Look at me," she cried, with a sudden burst of passionate reproach. "See my clothes, and my torn hands and bleeding fingers. 'Twas for *thee*, Pierre, and for thy craven companion yonder, I crossed yesterday the torrent by Alexandre's cottage, at the peril of my life. 'Twas I braved all the dangers of the village, with its cruel mob ready to seize me and tear me in pieces, and 'twas through darkness and risk I traversed the wood alone and at night-time, to bring thee help, and to leave comfort and hope in the hearts of those who were sorrowing for thee at home. All this I did for *thee*, Pierre Milano; not for thine own sake, but for the love of that good man, long cold in his grave, thy father. He gave his life to save my little Paul from a cruel and terrible death, and I—I would have given ten lives to make good so great a debt. But now, see what thou

hast done, thou most unworthy son of such a father. Thou hast killed the little child he died to save. Thou hast spilled his innocent blood ; he is lying dead down there at the foot of the ladder ; little Paul——” Christine’s voice had sunk now to a sobbing whisper. “ He will not trouble thee any longer ; I called to him, but it was no use. It is all over for him now.”

“ Christine,” cried Antoine, soothingly, “ listen to me for one moment. Thou must not think——”

“ Think,” cried Christine, turning passionately upon him. “ I do not think. I know. I know that he is dead. Have I not seen his face ? Look at it thyself, if thou dost not believe me ; but what of that ? ” She flung up her arms with an ecstatic movement. “ But what of that ? I know also he is alive again. He is with his Saviour—his pitiful, loving Saviour—where thy vulture’s heart, Pierre, cannot reach him, or snatch him from those arms.”

“ Christine, have pity ! ” moaned Pierre, helplessly.

“ Pity ! ” Christine’s face was terrible to look at. “ Pity ! dost *thou* speak to me of pity, thou monster of cruelty ; thou who hast murdered the little child beneath.”

“ I did not touch the child,” cried Pierre, vehemently, “ he fell backwards down the ladder. I would have saved him if I could.”

“ Yes, yes ; I swear to thee, Christine, he did not touch him. He had no act or part in the child’s death. This is as true, Christine, as I stand here in the sight of God.”

Antoine, as he spoke, advanced from the shadow of the mill.

“ And thou wouldst have me believe thy words, thou second Judas,” screamed Christine, turning sud-

denly upon him, "thou, who hast betrayed the innocent for a handful of gold."

"It is true, nevertheless," replied Antoine, humbly. "I saw little Paul gathering flowers on the slope underneath. I called out to him that we were dying up here of hunger and thirst. He did not appear at first to take in what I said, but presently, hearing Pierre weeping overhead, he came up the ladder with some food and water. He opened the trap-door, which up till then we had neither of us noticed; but the dog leaping up, startled him, and he fell backwards down into the room beneath."

While Antoine had been speaking, Christine's eyes had been fixed, full of blazing anger, upon his face, but as he completed his simple recital, her gaze sank inquiringly upon the floor, the dead dog, the broken vial, from which the water still leaked out, the dusty ground, the lump of hard, discoloured bread, untasted by the famishing boys, the bunch of withered buttercups, lying just as they fell, close at her very feet. This last sight seemed to change the tenor of her thoughts.

"And I came up here to curse thee, Pierre," she cried, with a strange thrill of remorse sounding in her voice, as she turned towards him. "Yes, the devil sprang up into my heart, and tempted me to curse thee, but instead thou shalt have blessing, for how can I curse where 'he found no place for anger, or call for vengeance on the head of him he gave his little life to save." She pointed as she spoke to the cruse of water and the bread, mute tokens of a heart pitiful and full of mercy.

"Yes, I will bless thee," she cried passionately, falling on her knees on the ground before Pierre, and

stretching out her withered hands. "I will pray to Him, as I have prayed scores of times before, to bless thee and thine, and to turn thy heart to seek the truth, and to make thee a child of His, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven; and then, Pierre, wilt thou not also have pity on me? I know well the hatred thou hast in thy heart for me, and, unjust though it be, I will not ask thee to cast it forth. Only one thing thou wilt do for me, wilt thou not, Pierre? look up at me, and say thou wilt."

Pierre, thus conjured, could not but uncover his face, and their eyes met, and for many a long day, for many a long year afterwards, that earnest gaze of a desperate heart haunted him.

"Pierre," she cried, stretching her poor torn hands towards him, "is it not true thou art bound by an oath to take my life, and is there not a price set on my head, which thou and Antoine yonder are prepared to share? Only three days ago I fled from before thy face, and cried to God to save me, for then had I not little Paul to shelter and to love? but, now I am here alone, Christine Delemont, the reputed witch, thou hast only to stretch out thy hand and slay me. I call upon thee now, Pierre Milano, to fulfil thy vow; now, here where I kneel. Be merciful, and ransom this poor sinful soul! I could not go down and look upon that poor face again, so white, so still. Ah! if thou couldst have found it in thy heart to murder him, why hesitate to strike me dead?"

"I tell thee he did not murder the child!" cried Antoine, passionately, as he noticed Pierre staring into the woman's eyes with a vacant gaze of horror. "Dost thou not see the lad himself is dying?"

"Dying ! I tell thee the lad is dead !" she replied, with a return of bitterest anguish and eyes wild with pain. "I saw his face ! those are his flowers !" She snatched at the buttercups and purple pansies lying withered on the floor, then, rising suddenly from her kneeling position, she stood up and called to Antoine. "Antoine !" she cried, passionately ; her voice was scarcely audible, and she clung to the beam of the mill for support ; "canst thou not help me down ? I must lay my little boy to sleep ; I cannot leave him there alone. He is dead, I know that," she said quickly, in reply to some expression she had seen in Antoine's eyes ; "it is only his poor body, but it must not lie there dishonoured. We will lay these flowers on his little loving heart, for if not they will cry to heaven for vengeance. Come hither, Antoine," she cried entreatingly, "and help me down this ladder. My brain is fast failing me ; I know not what I say ; I know not where I stand, or whither I would go ; only to be with him, to die with him, to follow him to glory."

Antoine's heart became rigid as parchment, and he had scarcely the strength to come forward to Christine's assistance. It was terrible to his young heart to see this woman wrestling thus desperately with the agony of her loss.

"Antoine !" she cried, catching him by his arm, and looking at him with a curious vacant earnestness, "before we go down thou must promise me this one thing, just this one thing, for to me it is impossible. Come close ; listen to me." She spoke now in a painful and labouring whisper. "His eyes are open, thou wilt close them ; there is blood on his forehead, thou wilt wash it away ? I cannot look on him again

until he lies at rest. Thou wilt lift him up tenderly, wilt thou not, Antoine, and lay him gently down on his bed of sweet walnut leaves beneath? When all is settled, thou wilt call me, softly, and then"—Christine paused, as if already summoning up her strength for the dreaded meeting, "and then, when first I look on his sweet face, I shall say this to myself, 'Little Paul is still asleep.' Yes, I shall lie to my own heart still further and say, 'Keep still; he will awake presently.' I shall go by-and-by to his side and touch his hand; I shall lay these dead flowers on his heart, on the little heart that will flutter no more beneath my touch, and *then* I shall believe. It was thus I first brought myself to look on the face of my dead Nicolas; for seest thou not, lad," she said, softly, as if to reason away the apparent foolishness of her words, "we cannot meet so great an agony without some borderland of hope, can we, Antoine?" She smiled somewhat vacantly as she said this, and, putting up her hand, full of Paul's withered buttercups and wild pansies, she pushed back her grey and tangled hair, and trying, as it were, to resume some chain of perplexing thought which was passing from her grasp, she continued, in the same dry whisper, "Yes, then I shall know he is dead, and I shall know also that it was God's will, and that 'all is well with the child.' But I—I? what shall I do then? Antoine, hast thou no comfort for me? If grief could kill me, I should have died a thousand times ere now; but perhaps—yes, now, perhaps, that he is dead, when I stoop over him to say good-bye, then something here may break;" she placed her hand over her heart and fixed her eyes with a kind of questioning entreaty on the boy's face;

"it might, might it not? Thou rememberest when Alexandre died, how Marie fell asleep?"

"Yes, I remember it," replied Antoine, compassionately.

"Nicolas, Alexandre, Marie; my little boys, too, who died in France of the fever, they are all there. Little Paul will not be lonely, and Christ will be in the midst of them. They shall follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth." Christine's voice had risen in a sudden triumph: her eyes were fixed on a golden band of clouds in the far-off sky. "There, there at least he will have peace, 'where the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest.'"

"Christine," cried Antoine, soothingly, "let us go down." He was terrified at her growing excitement, and a long groan of pain or misery from Pierre had struck a responsive chord in his own heart.

"Let us go down, Christine," he said, reassuringly, "I will do all thou hast asked me to do. There, I will go first and assist thee to descend. Give me thy hand, and do not fear."

Christine moved towards the trap-door slowly, and extended her hand, with unquestioning faith, to Antoine; but she was not looking at him, her face was turned towards Pierre, her eyes were fixed on Pierre's; his groan of anguish had attracted her attention also.

She placed her foot on the ladder, and then she paused. Some struggle was going on in her mind, the struggle between the wounded spirit and the soul which would fain forgive. At last, as if she had pondered her words, she said—

"Give me thy hand, Pierre; I know well the hatred thou hast in thy heart for me, and I also know

well all thou hast suffered ; but to-morrow, lad, when thou knowest all, thou must perforce forgive me. Stretch out thy hand to me, Pierre, and by-and-by, when——when the lad is asleep, thou also wilt come down and look at him.”

Pierre heard this appeal, but it came to him, as it were, through dim clouds of recollection and winding passages of thought, too sorrowful for utterance.

It was not the voice of Christine, his hated foe, that he heard, but the low pleading of his lost love, Angela, as she cried to him that last night for pardon,

“ To-morrow, Pierre, when thou knowest all, thou must perforce forgive me.”

With a dim consciousness that some one waited for a response, he stretched out his hand blindly in the direction of the voice, but his arm fell powerless to his side, for a wave of sudden darkness rushed over his exhausted mind, and blotted out all thoughts and all pain.

CHAPTER XXXII.

EXCITEMENT IN THE VILLAGE.

"JANETTE CHAUDRON is dead!"

These were the words which first greeted Pierre's ears, as, coming back out of a dark and silent world, he opened his eyes, for the first time, in the quiet upper chamber of his mother's chalet, and knew he was at home.

"Janette Chaudron is dead!" He heard the words, and he knew that the speaker was Marie Fedele; but as yet they floated about his weary brain like birds circling meaninglessly about a clouded sky, ere they fly home to rest in the twilight.

He could see that his mother was standing by the open window at the foot of his bed, and was listening to some one who was speaking up to her from the balcony outside, and the voice was certainly that of Marie Fedele.

"Are you sure the lad inside cannot hear?" she asked, sinking her voice a little.

"Certain; he has not spoken a word, or moved an eye-lash, since we laid him on the bed; but the doctor says we are not to waken him on any account. Go on and tell me about Janette; she did not die by her own hand, surely?"

"Yes; she was found drowned this morning in the pond at the back of her hovel; and already they have thrown her body into one of the old holes near the

castle, and filled it up with lime, as the Mayor would not allow her Christian burial."

"Why not?"

"Oh, they have found out many things about her, things that, had she lived longer, would have brought her, sooner or later, to the gallows."

"How so?"

"Well, they ransacked her things, and carried all her letters and papers to the Mayor. It appears that she was at one time engaged to be married to Christine's husband, who was, they say, the handsomest man in Protogno, but seeing her once knock down her crippled baby sister with a blow, he seems to have quarrelled with Janette, and to have broken off the match, and married instead the little maid who had charge of the child, which accounts for the deadly hatred with which she pursued that unhappy woman Christine, and she would gladly have brought her to a cruel death."

"Wicked wretch!" cried Pauline, shaking her head, and turning a little in the direction of her son's bed. "Pierre, when he returns to his senses, shall hear of this."

"And there will be more still to tell him," said Marie Fedele, lowering her voice a little; "things which, if he have not a heart of stone, will stir him to the quick."

"Ah! what further must we hear and bear?" cried Pauline, with a groan.

"The true story of Angela's death has at last come out, and it is at Janette's door the whole blame is to be laid. The old chef, who has known all about it since the poor child's death, but who was under a vow not to reveal it, in the agonies of death and remorse confessed it all."

"It was, then, for that purpose he sent for thee the night that——," Pauline hesitated, "my son shot you in the arm?"

"Yes; when I got to his house the Mayor was there, for whom he had also sent, and his dissolution was close at hand. He had, however, time and strength enough to reveal the whole sad truth, namely, that Angela had died of poison which Janette had brought to the inn, and which he, poor blind old man! had given her in a mistake, mixed up in some cake or soup; that is to say, she first partook of it in some soup, but was well enough to go out, though feeling very ill, and call at thy house. Then again, on her return home, thinking she looked sad and scared, he baked a special cake for her supper, of which she took just a few morsels to please him; and in the morning, as we all know, she was found lying dead upon her bed."

"Ah! how will Pierre live to hear this?" cried Pauline, wringing her hands, "and to know that Janette was the murderess!"

"Well, not that, for she never intended to injure the girl; but she gave the powder carelessly to the chef, to destroy some rats, and added it was useless, except in connection with some ridiculous incantation. The poor child, it now turns out, discovered, some hours before her death, that she had taken the poison, and dreading lest her father should blame himself hereafter for listening to Janette's advice, she made the old chef swear that, unless on his death-bed, and that his soul was harassed, he would never betray the cause of her decease; and so the poor blind man has lived on ever since, oppressed with this most appalling secret, and though conscious of Christine's

innocence, he has never been able to save her from the hatred of those who suspected her, while that black-hearted Janette, though knowing her own share in the girl's death, has never hesitated to throw the guilt on the innocent. And now she has again been guilty of the death of a fellow-creature, as poor little Paul, the sweetest little blossom that was ever blown to earth from the garden of heaven, is now lying stiff and cold on the bed in my house, where he would surely not be, were it not for the vile insinuations with which she hounded on your son to pursue and kill him."

"I did not kill him," cried a voice from the bed, which made Pauline start round, and grow pale, as if the voice of one long dead had been uplifted.

"Pierre, Pierre, my son," she cried hysterically, then paused, seeing the drops of cold sweat on the lad's forehead, and the expression of anguish in his sunken eye.

"I did not kill little Paul!" he shouted hoarsely, as if addressing some one he did not see; then all at once he burst into a passion of weeping, and stretching out his arms towards his mother, drew her head down on the pillow beside him. "Mother, mother, dearest!" he cried, tightening his arms in an earnest and loving embrace, "thou at least wilt have a kind word for me. I am all that thou hast said—a poltroon, a coward, a vaurien; but *there*, up in that awful mill, I knew then how I loved thee, and that I—I had—yes, with all my love, I had broken thy heart, and made thy life one long great bitterness."

Pauline could not deny what he said, but she wiped the drops of sweat from his brow, and kissed him again and again passionately, and by-and-by, as she murmured words of love into his ear, he fell asleep.

Meantime the excitement in the village knew no bounds. Indeed, from the evening when Marie had been sent for by the chef, to hear his dying confession, the pulse of the little town had throbbed to fever heat.

For a day and a half Pierre had been missing from his home, and no clue had been found to his whereabouts. Pauline Milano was to be seen pacing the town like one bereft of her senses. Antoine Fedele was also absent, and Marie, though she concealed her grief more skilfully, and went about her daily work, was evidently smitten with some deadly fear.

It soon became known in the town that the young man had been seen on the opposite side of the river on the afternoon of the previous day, but by whom, or where, it was impossible to ascertain. It was plain that Sebastian, at least, gave credit to the report, for thrice in the afternoon he had gone down to the river-side, where, in the night, the bridge had been swept away, and vainly sought to ford the torrent, but the fury of the storm had been such that all attempts were manifestly futile. Pauline's agony of mind grew to near the borderland of madness, and her anxiety was no longer scoffed at by her friends, but she rather found fresh food for alarm in their gloomy and troubled faces.

On the morning of the third day the whole town turned out to assist in the search for the missing ones. The torrent was successfully breasted, and parties of three and four wandered off through the woods.

It was all useless. They returned exhausted and disappointed. Some expressed one opinion, some another, as to their fate, but few, if any, had the least

hope that they would ever return alive to the town of Protogno.

On the night of the third day a rumour sped through the town that Christine had been seen stealthily entering the pine wood at the rear of Fedele's cottage, and that shortly afterwards Marie had proceeded carefully and watchfully to the door at the back of the Mayor's residence, where she had been admitted, and where she had remained for some time. This set the village tongues going again.

Many people in the town sat up that night. The mere fact that Christine had been noticed hovering about the village filled some with the greatest alarm, and not a few rushed to Janette's cottage for special charms and potions against the evil eye; but their mission was a vain one, as the door of Janette's cottage was fast locked, and she would not reply to their cries, knocks, or entreaties.

The next morning early, about two o'clock, in the grey dawn of the summer daybreak, a cottager, old and infirm, who lived on the edge of the forest, close by the river-side, and who could not rest for the weary pains of rheumatism and the fears of some coming evil, saw, with much amazement and some fear, three mules, saddled and bridled, and led by Sebastian Fedele himself, being driven down a side path which crossed his fields in the direction of the river. One mule carried a pannier on its shoulders, which evidently contained food, for a bottle of wine and a loaf of bread were visible, protruding from one corner, and cloaks and shawls were thrust loosely into the opposite basket. Sebastian's face was white, and set, and drawn with pain, but there was a look of such earnest resolve in his eyes, that old David Gartmann,

the father of the village blacksmith, looking out of his window, said to himself as he watched him. "That man knows no fear in his heart but the fear of God."

Four hours later, about six in the morning, in the beautiful bright light of the risen sun, he saw Sebastian returning. A woman clad from head to foot in a dark cloak walked and stumbled by his side. The foremost mule was led cautiously forward by the bridle, Fedele keeping his arm tightly clasped round a figure which drooped helplessly downwards on its saddle. On the second rode a lad with white sunken face and lack-lustre eyes, who seemed to see or take in naught above or around him, while on the third mule laid softly across the panniers was something stiff and still; a white cloth was cast over it and wound round it loosely, but it could not conceal the outline of something dread and strange which filled the old man's heart with a thrill, and as the mule, picking its steps daintily along the pathway, came close beneath the cottager's window, he saw drooping idly from below the white covering spread over the pannier a child's hand, white and soft.

Then David Gartmann said in his heart, "Yonder is Christine Delemont. Ah! the little Paul is dead!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

FRIENDS AT LAST.

IT was the evening now, and Pierre, refreshed by food and slumber, had risen from his bed.

"Only this one last time I must disobey you, mother," he had said, softly, as he kissed her poor pale face and motioned her away. "I must rise and go out ; the air will refresh me, and there is one thing I would see and do before I sleep to-night."

It was the old firm movement of the lips, the steady glance of a fixed determination which Pauline knew so well. She felt she must yield, and yield she did, but her heart misgave her as she saw the trembling hand which waved her from the room, and heard the long deep sigh which broke forth irresistibly as she closed the door.

Pierre arose and dressed himself slowly, and with a great effort. Every now and then he clutched at a chair or table as a fit of giddiness rushed over him, or a cold faintness overpowered him ; but, as of old, no weakness of body or mind could turn him from his purpose. He was dressed at length, and he stood grey and still, in the centre of the room. There was now for the first moment, irresolution, distress, embarrassment, visible in his face, which suddenly flushed crimson and then turned to a deathly white.

A question, evidently of some vital import, had at this moment to be decided. Twice he moved towards the door, and twice he turned back. At last, with a

long groan of anguish, he fell upon his knees by his bedside, and, burying his face in the bed-clothes, he prayed. It was scarcely more than a cry, a cry of a wrestling, struggling soul; there were no spoken words; only the hands, extended upwards in a momentary agony of entreaty, told that help was claimed from above.

As he passed out through the gate some thought full of pain assailed him suddenly, for he covered his eyes with his hands and moved on hurriedly. The kennel standing empty by the path had an anguish for his heart which even Pauline, seeking to read his sorrow, could not fully realise.

When he turned the corner of the road which led into the village street he made straight for the chalet belonging to the Fedeles. His head was sunk upon his chest, and he voluntarily ignored all the greetings of the villagers standing in their doorways, and of the passers-by who would have congratulated him upon his safe return.

Once only he looked up, as a little child, leaning from a window overhead, shouted out to its mother as she crossed the road into a field on the other side, "Adieu! adieu!"

It was a glance swift as the upward start of a terrified bird, and for a moment Pierre paused, and seemed like one pierced through with some deadly shaft of pain; but by-and-by he resumed his descent of the hill, and though a mist overshadowed his eyes, and his knees quaked beneath him, he did not pause again, but walked forward like one stumbling in a dream till he drew near the gate of the Fedeles' chalet.

And it *was* in a dream that he walked that summer

afternoon, a sorrowful dream of the past, full of the bitterest memories and keenest pain. Once before, with just such a sickening dread and failing limbs, had he not walked this road fearful of the looks of passers-by or the words of friends? The same dread ordeal had to be gone through then, the same keen remorse and fiery looking forward to judgment.

Pierre, looking up hastily, saw Marie standing at the gate of her garden. She was talking to a neighbour, and weeping bitterly. He started aside, and going up the little lane under the chestnut-trees, he turned into the pine wood at the rear of the house. This, too, was full of memories. The saw-pit where Marie had pleaded with her son ; why, years might have rolled over his head since that early morning when she reproached him in such unmeasured terms, and yet it could not have been at farthest a week since he had stood there abashed, yet vibrating with anger and the desire for a full and perfect revenge.

He strode on ; he durst not pause to think. He said to himself with a sickly smile, "A hundred years hence this life and all its bitterness will be ended ;" but, as he said so, the smile died out suddenly, and a voice which could not die cried almost within him, "After death, the judgment !"

It was terrible for Pierre, this strange dream of horror in which he moved. The earth, the air, the trees seemed full of the consciousness of his presence. A hawk uttering its piercing cry overhead had a voice for him which none but he could understand. The very stones cried out to him in croaking and discordant tones.

Pierre, who had been slowly moving down through the wood to the house, turned in at the back door,

which stood open, and paused a moment at the foot of the staircase, irresolute. It required strength of body as well as strength of mind to mount those steps, and he leaned his arm on the wooden banisters, and pressed his white face upon his sleeve.

When he lifted up his head again Marie Fedele was standing beside him, with eyes which shone dangerously through their cloak of tears, and lips parted with breathless anger and fear.

"Pierre Milano, where art thou going?" she cried, in a voice which thrilled cruelly through the whole building, while she placed herself between the stairs and him. "Go home; thou shalt not mount these stairs. Why hast thou left thy house, wretched lad? Is it to disturb the peace of the dead, or to add sin to sin, and sorrow to sorrow? I will not let thee pass. Go home, I say, to the living, who need thy care, thou unworthy son of a good and patient mother."

Pierre looked into Marie's face with a kind of questioning horror. Her words fell on his ear with the same dread sound as the claps of thunder in the forest, which had reverberated so lately through his fainting brain. He stretched out his hands as if to defend himself from their fury, and staggered back against the wall.

"Go out yonder into the fresh air," added Marie, pointing to the open doorway. "Go home, I beg of thee, at once. Antoine is ill in bed up-stairs, raving with fever, and thou shouldst have at least as much on thy conscience to drive thee mad as he has."

Pierre, clutching at a deal table, which stood beside him, drew himself upward from the wall, and opened his lips to reply, but they were white and dry, and no sound came from them.

"Stay, and I will fetch thee water," cried Marie, softening at something in Pierre's face, which was strange to her. "Sebastian will give thee his arm and see thee home."

Pierre shook his head, mutely, gave one more glance towards the stairs, which he might not ascend, and slowly moved out into the yard. Marie met him at the threshold with a draught of pure spring water, but he waved her aside, and did not take it from her hand.

"Thou hast treated me like a dog!" he said, bitterly; "it needed not thy rebuke to break my heart."

"Mother, mother! where art thou? Come up to me," cried a thick voice from above. "Water, water! I am dying of thirst."

Marie instantly turned, and went up the staircase quickly, carrying with her the cup of water she had just offered to Pierre, while Pierre, stumbling a pace or two blindly forward, sank down in an utter exhaustion of body and mind, on the lowest plank of the wooden balcony, which led by a long flight of steps to the upper rooms of the house.

It was the hour of sunset, the beautiful sunset which makes the Alpine valleys sing ere they sink to sleep, and the snow-peaks blush against the amber sky. High up in the air, *of* the world, and yet, seemingly above and beyond it, rose the pure, white peak from its sheath of pine-covered hills, completing the almost celestial beauty of the landscape, in its soft but majestic simplicity.

Pierre's eyes, with a dim dreariness, rested on this far-off glittering hill. With it were associated all the traditions of his childhood, the strength of a young lad's first and earnest love, and with it, too, the first dim

aspirations of a sinful heart. Now, in this dark hour of his still young life, though his eyes rested on its beauty, he saw it not, nor could his ears hear the ministering chorus, which for ever cries among the mountain tops, to the sorrowful and sin-laden, toiling in the world below, "Lift thine eyes ! oh, lift thine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh thy help."

No help seemed near this afternoon. No hope, no God. No angel voices crying comfortingly from the far-off evening sky. No whisper in the heart ; no small, still voice saying, "Come unto me ; though thy sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow."

And yet it was a voice that startled Pierre from an abyss of misery, deep it seemed to him, and measureless, as the bottomless pit of despair.

"Pierre," it said, softly, in a tone which pierced through his whole frame, with its thrill of pain and pity, "wilt thou not come up hither, and see the child ?"

Pierre looked up hastily. A woman was standing on the gallery steps above him ; a gaunt woman, whose face he knew too well, and whose every feature was engraven on his soul, with the pen of a fierce dislike, and the gall of a bitter hate. It was Christine, and she gazed at him with eyes which shrank not from his glance, but were full of a great compassion.

Pierre rose up with giddy haste, and reeled against the wall of the house. "I am coming," he said faintly, and, catching at the banisters, made a fruitless effort to ascend.

"Have patience a moment, and I will help thee."

Christine came down the steps unhesitatingly, and stretched out her hand to him ; the little child, for whose safety she might formerly have feared, was now

safely folded in the Saviour's arms, far beyond the reach of cruelty, and her own heart held no selfish dread for her own life; besides, had not Christ set her an example of forgiveness? the bruised reed He would not break. She smiled as she stretched out her hand, and said softly, "Thou wilt be better, lad, presently! We will go up and look at him. His smile will cure thy pain; his sleep is full of peace." Her voice choked a little, as she whispered these words, but no tears fell.

Pierre leaned heavily on the proffered arm, though he trod softly, and felt, with a strange throb of terror, that he was about to enter into the presence of the Great King.

The windows were wide open; the white-frilled curtains waved in the wind. A honey-laden bee was rushing busily from wall to wall, a scent of new-mown hay filled the air with a thousand dim and sweet recollections of a far-off innocent childhood, and upon a bed snowy as the peak beyond, now fainting into coldness and death, lay something whiter still. It was little Paul, smiling his first and last long smile of perfect peace.

"It will cure thy pain," Christine had said to Pierre comfortingly, but when, a moment later, Marie Fedele opened the door hurriedly, and looked in, she saw only a face of uplifted anguish, hands smiting each other in the bitterness of a late remorse, and lips rigid and grey, which sought to form the cry for pardon and peace, but from which no sound came.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

PEACE.

IT was the evening of the same day, a calm, still evening, full of a deep repose. The purple rocks amongst the ferns and grass seemed all asleep; the chestnuts dropped their thorny nuts silently into the pasture fields; the cattle browsed in groups, in a calm content, now that the flies had ceased to sting and tease them. There was a white moon visible in the blue heaven above, and a red sun just dropping behind the jagged hill-tops.

No special sound of life—busy, active, human life—broke the quiet of the dreaming village, except just up beyond the town and the saw-mill, the throb of a bell from the church-tower.

It was a sound somewhat rare in this little healthy mountain village, melancholy and slow, whose vibrations crept up through the rocks and wooded hills, and made the cottager, in his high-up home on the upper slopes listen, and the mother press the ailing child more closely to her breast.

It said, "Some one is dead in the village beneath; come hither, all that loved him, and see him laid in his last home. Let us commit his body to the grave with reverence and tears, and his soul to God who first gave him life, and now adds to it an immortal crown. Come, come, come," it cried with a mournful appeal. "Come, all ye that have loved and lost; the

silver cord is loosed, the golden bowl is broken ; come, come see the end of all things."

On one ear that evening the sound of the bell fell with a strange significance. The axe of the remorseless executioner could not fall with greater sharpness of agony, on the sufferer's neck beneath, than did those mournful notes fall on his aching ear.

Pierre, seated in his own room, heard them through every fibre of his frame, and as each throb smote upon his wearied heart, a responsive quiver passed over his whole body. His mother had risen and left the room. No stranger, not even she who had given him birth, durst meddle with such grief, such wrestling between the searching spirit of the avenger and the failing flesh seeking about in the darkness for the hand stretched out to save and the arm which is never shortened.

"I cannot!" he cried at last, starting up, and smiting his hand violently against the wooden casement in front of him—"I cannot listen to it any longer. Yes; would that I could lie down this moment in his grave and end a life bitterer than a thousand deaths!"

"My father is up yonder in the graveyard; little Angela is asleep there also; and now Paul, whom I have murdered, will lie there too. Why, the very earth which holds them so securely would rise up and cast my body forth! Ah!" he cried, with a quivering smile of utter self-contempt, as he stretched out his hand to close the casement, "I believe I am the veriest coward upon earth. Antoine has said so scores of times, and it is true! I am afraid to live, and yet more afraid to die. If death was sleep I would lie down now and sleep for ever; but I am still so young: all my life, my long, long life lies drearily before

me. What shall I do with it? To whom shall I give it, now she is gone?" He looked hastily up at the snow peak opposite, lying so calmly still against the evening sky, and it seemed to him that he heard distinctly a voice from the far-off hills, oh! so far away, answer his wailing cry, "À Dieu! à Dieu!"

"To God!" he repeated, mechanically, scarcely heeding the strange nature of the response, or questioning whence it came, till the cry uprose again, a weird, sobbing sound, nearing now and more plaintive, children's voices sighing out some sweet and sad refrain—

"Addio! Addio!"

"Mercy! it is the funeral of little Paul."

He withdrew hastily into the shadow of the open casement, and drew a quick, sharp breath of pain. He could see them turning the angle of the road, and he knew that, to reach the churchyard, they must pass beneath the window of his room. The coffin was even now in sight, covered with a drooping cloth of snowy white, and on the cloth were flowers. Being raised on the shoulders of four of the villagers, Pierre saw it first, and heard the refrain of the soft Italian hymn, with its pathetic farewell cry—

"Addio! Addio!"

A drooping chestnut-tree hid them a moment from his sight, and then the whole of the sad procession came into view. Fedele and Gartmann walked first, carrying the coffin on a wooden framework, supported at the back by the Mayor and old Marco Biondino, the innkeeper. Immediately behind them came Christine, walking with slow and hesitating steps, leaning on the arm of Marie Fedele, and behind them followed three or four village children dressed in

white, whose voices, melodious and pure, rose up with a sorrowful pathos upon the evening air.

For a moment the procession halted in front of Pauline Milano's house, and at the same instant the door of Pierre's room opened, and his mother looked in.

"Art thou coming, my son?"

"I!" A spasm of such utter self-detestation and horror passed over Pierre's face that Pauline durst not look at him; and, going out quickly, she closed the door, and went down the gallery steps into the roadway with aching heart and eyes blinded with tears.

"Alas! poor love," she murmured to herself; "he will never be the same fine lad again, never; his heart is broken."

She had never been an over-wise mother, this Pauline Milano. She had loved too well and sought too much. But this time she judged wisely, and spoke, unwittingly, the truth.

Pierre would never be the same lad again. Like St. Paul, suddenly arrested in his mission of cruelty and persecution, Pierre had been struck powerless to the earth, just when his hand might have grasped the goal of his hateful ambition. For days past he had wandered in a great darkness, a blindness of the heart, which cried for light, and, looking up, saw no responsive gleam; but now, as the little funeral choir passed out of sight and hearing, and the soft "farewell" cry of little Paul climbed up amongst the pines which shadowed the churchyard, this cry of a desperate heart was answered, and the scales of a life-long blindness fell, as if smitten by a sudden fiery flash, from Pierre's eyes.

At that moment he saw himself as he was. The searching sword of the Spirit left nought concealed in

the dark recesses of his heart, but thrust forth his sins in all their hideousness before those new and shrinking eyes.

"Murderer, coward, villain!" he cried, as once more he smote his hands together and groaned aloud. "It is I who have done all this."

Then he cast himself on the ground, as if the sight of so much guilt was more than he could bear. "Lord, have mercy upon me!" he cried aloud. "Jesus, forgive me!" Bitter tears fell from his eyes as he wrestled in the anguish of his soul. "Forgive me!" he cried again, in a lingering agony of grief.

By-and-by the tolling of the bell was over, and Pierre rose up from his knees, like one stupefied, and walked to the open window. It seemed to him that all the outside world, with its background of purple hills and primrose sky, was a dream, and only himself and that strange new palpitating soul within him were real.

Oh, that he could now, even now, stretch out his hand and touch the mercy-seat of God, catch one glimpse of those dear dead faces, so white and still, glorified and made perfect in the happiness of a love full and measureless, but for ever placed beyond his sight, out of reach of bitter memories and the achings of a fearful heart.

He gazed and gazed at that amber sky, with its little lakes of gold and islands of opal, until it seemed to him, with a dreamy indistinctness, that the heavens above and the whole earth beneath were both alike in movement, and were passing away from before his sight like a scroll. He could not reason it out, but the faint moon which a moment before shone in the sky a white and glistening sickle, now dropped to the earth

silently, and the stars seemed to hurry to and fro across the heavens.

And as he still looked and wondered, the snow peak opposite seemed also as if gifted with life. It lifted itself up slowly and silently out of its purple cerements of shadowy pine and overhanging rock, and moved with a strange resistless grace across the heavens. It seemed to Pierre that it was drifting away from his sight for ever, towards a great gate of gold which lay wide open in the western sky.

His heart beat with loud, quick throbs, as it passed before his eyes, not lingering or turning back, but moving ever forward with that noiseless progress towards the ruddy sunset glare.

"Angela, my Angela, stay for me! I come," he cried out eagerly, stretching his hands into the empty air; but, alas! the new-born soul might not mount up yet, with outstretched wings of love and hope, to such celestial heights. The poor fainting body still lingered upon earth, and as Pierre opened his eyes, he was aware that he was no longer gazing at the sunset sky with its far-off hills of gold, but lying prone on the floor of the little upper room, with his head on his mother's knee.

"Mother, dearest mother!" he said softly, as he drew her poor faded face close to his and kissed away her tears, "I have been asleep, but I have seen heaven. Yes; Angela was right, there *is* a heaven, and we shall yet meet there."

* * * * *

An hour later, and Pierre slowly went down the gallery steps and turned his feet in the direction of the churchyard. It was the hour for supper, and the village street was quite deserted. Few noticed the tall

lad who, with head bent upon his chest, took the path which led past the village saw-mill, up through the rock-strewn meadows, and across the planked bridge over the rushing mill-stream, to the little iron gate in the churchyard wall.

It was open, and he passed in with slow and sightless steps, and with eyes which sought not to see, and which were dry and terrible in their sorrow.

It was easy to find this new grave, so small and quiet, with nothing to show where the head rested save a cross of brown sticks broken from a branch of that tree which grew above his Angela's grave, and one of whose bright winter berries lay at this moment next his bursting heart.

Pierre knelt down beside the grave and groaned. There was no one to hear him in this silent spot, or to see his tears. The very bees, who all day long hovered over the sweet violets and scented flowers of this garden of the dead, had gone to rest, the daisies had fallen asleep, and the grass drooped heavily.

And here, within a few feet of him, little Paul lay asleep, with closed eyes and folded hands, and that smile of an endless peace stamped on his faded lips.

Once (how long ago it seemed now!) Pierre had knelt on this very spot of earth before, and cried aloud to an unknown God for vengeance: for skill to plan, and strength to carry out a desperate revenge.

And now his cry had been heard, and the answer sent. The cup of vengeance had been filled to the brim and placed within his grasp, but his lips refused to taste it, and his eyes turned from it with horror.

"Little Paul, what can I do for thee?" he cried, passionately, as he lay his cheek on the earth, and threw his arms tenderly across the irresponsible mound.

"Is there nothing?" he pleaded hoarsely, "no word of sorrow or love which can reach thy ears? Oh, that thou couldst open thy poor, pale lips and speak to me; only one word, one word of comfort or of hope."

For many minutes Pierre remained with his face pressed against the clay, and it was only with a great effort that he at length dragged himself from the ground, and looked upward towards the sky.

But as he would have knelt to pour forth his soul in prayer, he heard the sound of a footstep drawing near him, and, looking round swiftly, he saw a woman standing close beside him, and he heard her say, in a voice drowned with tears—

"Pierre, who art thou looking for? Little Paul is not here, he is risen. If thou wouldst find him now, lad, thou must look up to heaven."

"Yes," replied Pierre, eagerly, "I will look up; I will look up; but thou, thou also, hast thou forgiveness for me? thou whom I have wronged beyond all words, and beyond almost the power of pardon."

"Let us not speak of words," cried Christine, as she caught his outstretched hands in hers; "I do not need them. Little Paul, he knew no words. He had no words, but he could speak to God. He had no words, but he could tell me all his love. He had no words, but all the books that ever were written could not teach thee more, Pierre, than could his poor dumb lips. God placed but one prayer in his heart, one belief in his soul, one last farewell message on his lips. In fear, in joy, in pain, in sorrow, in death, he had but one heaven-directed cry. 'Canst thou not hear him even now up in yonder heaven? 'À Dieu,' he cries. 'Look up to God,' love God, cling to God, rest in God, for ever with God; farewell to earth, farewell

to sin, farewell to sorrow, farewell to death. It is all there, in that one word, 'Adieu.'" In the agony of her grief, Christine flung herself on the ground and writhed in this last bitter parting with her dead.

And while she still wrestled with her grief, and bowed her head over the earth which held her treasure, Pierre, looking steadfastly up to God, knelt down on the little walk which divided the graves of Angela and Paul, and, placing his lips earnestly on the wooden cross, which stood in all its uncarved simplicity at the head of little Paul's last home, and his arm round the carved stone which marked the last resting-place of his lost love, he cried out, with a voice which might almost have roused the dead sleeping so heavily around him, "*À Dieu, à Dieu, à Dieu! I give my soul to a merciful Saviour, and my life to God.*"

* * * * *

More than a hundred years have rolled away. The town of Protogno still stands in the purple valley, and its rust-coloured houses still wear the same aspect of homely comfort and independence. The children play as noisily as ever in the street, or amongst the grey rocks on the hill-side, the self-same rocks on which Angela sat in the old days beneath the chestnut-trees.

Above, on the hill-side, the same church bell throbs forth upon the violet-scented air, calling the villagers to baptism, to marriage—to death.

In the churchyard beneath, the ground is full of new graves; those of Angela and little Paul have passed away from human sight, and the bodies of all those who loved them and suffered for them, and who formed a part of this village history, have crumbled long ago into dust.

But the story of their lives and the history of their deaths is written in the hearts of the simple country folk, who, on summer evenings, sitting at their cottage doors, recite it to their children and their children's children gathered around them.

Not a day passes, but a group of peasants may be seen standing admiringly in front of a building, large and spacious, which has been erected exactly opposite the mountain gorge, where the snow peak still stands looking forth upon the valley, in its everlasting purity and peace.

On the stone above the main door of this house there are engraven these words :

ERECTED BY ME, PIERRE MILANO,
TO THE GLORY OF GOD,
FOR THE SUFFERING CHILDREN OF THIS VILLAGE.

Above these words, in the space under the pointed sloping gables of the hospital, and protected by it from the stress of weather, there is a fresco painted in exquisite taste, and in colour harmonising with the surrounding landscape.

It is a picture of our Lord, calling the little children to Him to bless them. At His knee there stands a boy with uplifted head, flaxen hair and eyes, full of a strange and earnest appeal. In the corner of the painting, almost out of sight, there are these words :

ANTONIO FEDELE, *pinxit*.

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